

The Asian Ladybeetle

By Lloyd Eighme

December 2, 2011



Asian Ladybeetles are in the house

Imported to solve one problem, Asian Ladybeetles become nuisances themselves.

Many people have asked about the “ladybugs” that invade their houses in the late fall when the weather begins to turn cold. These “ladybugs” often come by the hundreds and are very obnoxious, crawling into everything. Most people recognize ladybugs as a beneficial insect and are therefore reluctant to kill them, but want to know where they come from and why they are in the house rather than out in the garden where they belong.

These house invaders are the Asian ladybeetle (*Harmonia axyridis*) that were imported by the timber industry to help control aphids and other insect pests of trees. They are from China and Japan and were imported and released many times from as early as 1916 in California and later from 1978-1985 in Washington State, but they apparently did not survive in the new environment. Suddenly in 1993 large populations of Asian ladybeetles appeared in Western Washington. It is not known whether these were from earlier introductions that took many years to become established or from more recent unintentional introductions through commercial freight shipments from Asia.

Why are the Asian ladybeetles invading people’s houses? Our native ladybeetles, of which there are at least 15 species found commonly in Western Washington, are rarely seen in houses and then only as accidental wanderers. The Asians aggressively search for ways to enter houses when the weather turns cold in the fall. It has been observed in the Asian homelands of this ladybeetle that they typically fly to cliffs and rocky hillsides in the fall to hibernate in cracks and crevices where they find some protection from enemies and extreme cold. It seems as though that instinctive pattern of behavior takes them to the south facing walls of a house where the sun provides some warmth in shorter days of fall.

I have observed hundreds of Asian ladybeetles crawling on the south side of my two story house on a sunny fall day. They are persistent in searching for small openings and even good window screens do not keep them out. Once inside the house, they crawl and fly everywhere searching for a hiding place in which to spend the winter. The longer days of spring awakens the second instinctive pattern of returning to the forest from which they came. Only a small fraction of those that invaded the house in the fall survive in the extremely low humidity of our heated houses through the winter, but there are always plenty to make the occupants of the house think they are being invaded a second time.

Many people feel that killing ladybugs is a crime that deserves punishment. What then should be done with ladybeetles that are in the house? Some recommend that they be

captured and returned to the garden where they can feed on aphids. That is much easier said than done. They not only smell bad when handled, they can pinch you with their mandibles if they are mistreated.

What if the ladybeetles in the house are vacuumed up and destroyed? Does that mean more aphids in the garden? Were our native resident ladybeetles doing their job of controlling aphids before the Asians arrived? These and many other questions need answers.

So, whether you call them ladybugs or ladybeetles, these little creatures are an important part of our ecosystem and we need to learn more about how to identify them and how to live with them.

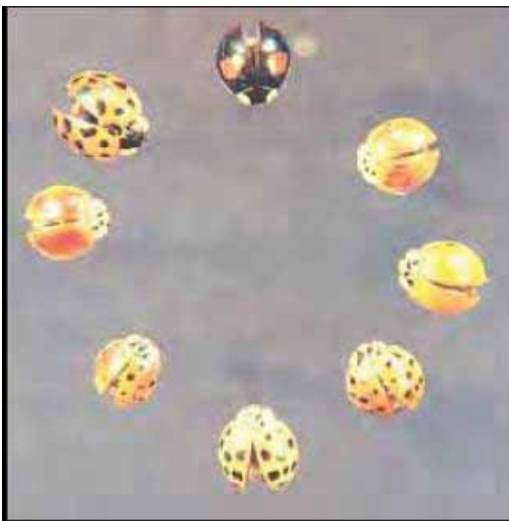


Photo by WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners
Above: Asian ladybeetles have no uniform coloration or markings, making them difficult to identify. Some closely resemble our native ladybeetles, with their red wings and varying number of black dots, or none. Bottom Right: Ladybeetle larvae bear colored spots, though little resemblance otherwise to the adult insect. All varieties of ladybeetles, and especially their larvae, voraciously consume aphids, making them important friends of gardeners.



Photo by Scott Terrell / Skagit Valley Herald



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RESOURCES:

- Plant and Insect Diagnosis Clinic, WSU Skagit County Extension, 17768 Westar Land, Burlington. Winter hours by appointment: call 360-428-4270 ext. 0.
- “Insects of Skagit County,” Lloyd Eighme. Available through WSU Skagit County Extension.
- “Insects of the Pacific Northwest,” Peter Haggard and Judy Haggard, Timber Press, 2006.

Ladybugs: Asian of native

By Virgene Link

Should you worry about trying to distinguish Asian ladybeetles from natives? At the WSU Discovery Garden and around my home I almost exclusively see our native ladybeetles. Bear in mind that markings and coloration are highly variable in all ladybeetles. Entomologists have the advantage of years of experience and the use of a microscope. The “W” or “M” often found on the thorax of Asian ladybeetles varies greatly. The transverse elytral ridge at the rear of the wing covering, found only on the Asian species, is visible only through a microscope.

The easiest way to identify Asian ladybeetles is by their behavior. If you find a cluster of ladybeetles in your home, they are the Asian variety. Should your home become a haven for Asian ladybeetles, please remember that all ladybeetles, native and Asian, are beneficial. They all feast on aphids, especially when the ladybeetles are in their immature or larval stage. However, they can be a nuisance.

If you have a large number of ladybeetles in your home please be kind. Gently use your hand or a piece of paper and slide the ladies into a paper bag. A soft brush may also work. Using a vacuum, even trying to have a nylon stocking between the attachment and the hose to catch them, will probably inflict injury.

Place them in a cardboard box or paper bag with air holes in an unheated garage or storage shed, where they will become dormant. When the weather moderates in the late winter or early spring, and they start moving, open the bag or box and set them outside to disperse.

Try to prevent Asian ladybeetles from getting into your home. Use caulk, weather-stripping, door sweeps and thresholds to plug entry points. Never use pesticides in your home.

Ladybeetle Removal tips

By Virgene Link

The ladybeetle ordered through garden catalogs is actually a native of California, *Hippodamia convergens*. This species migrates, and is carried by wind to the high Sierra, where they hibernate in pine needles. They are collected from this hibernating mass for shipping. Once they are released, they want to “migrate” again, and usually leave the area.