

## Roll Call in the Garden by Monique Paré

I am fascinated by “bugs”. When I am out admiring the flowers in my garden, my attention always shifts to these other life forms so important in our gardens. An army of these tiny creatures call our gardens home and most of them are friends rather than foes.

I watch a ladybug as she explores a plant, patiently searching for a potential meal. When she finds a promising site, she might lay a cluster of eggs underneath the leaves. A few days later, I may be lucky enough to see her larvae, colourful alligator-like bugs that are likely to be found feeding on aphids. Aphids are unwelcome pests that suck the sap from plants and excrete honeydew, a sticky substance that drops onto the leaves underneath where they feed. Ants often guard aphid colonies to harvest that honeydew, and I have seen them successfully chasing predators away from their “aphid farm”.



**1 Ladybug larva and aphids**

Hover flies, also called flower or syrphid flies, are regulars around flowers and feed on nectar. There are many species, but the ones I see most often are quite small and, if looked at quickly, could be mistaken for small wasps or bees. Many of these friendly flies are very good at mimicking wasps to scare off potential attackers, but they are harmless to humans. They spend their time hovering among the flowers and laying eggs

wherever they find aphids so the larvae will find food as soon as

they emerge. Now that I can recognize them, I often notice these larvae - small greenish maggots that taper towards the head. They also consume many other small insects. The larger hover flies look like a cross between a fly and a bee, but they have the same habits as the smaller types.

There are many species of wasps that frequent the garden. Most of these are beneficial or at least neutral. Every so often, I will see a spectacular Ichneumon wasp. The female has a very long ovipositor (egg-laying appendage) extending well behind her slender body. I know that she is looking for a caterpillar or similar larvae in which to lay her eggs. The closely-related Braconid wasps also parasitize many caterpillars. I have occasionally found the remnants of a European cabbage worm with Braconid cocoons on it. There are other tiny wasps that I wouldn't normally notice except when I have chanced upon clusters of their cocoons on parasitized Gypsy Moth caterpillars.

The larger wasps, especially yellowjackets, are a mixed blessing. Early in the season, they are mainly interested in finding caterpillars to feed their developing larvae. However, by the end of summer, they switch to sweet foods for themselves – this is when they become more of a nuisance with their persistent interest in our food and drinks at picnics!! Bald-faced hornets will

stick to their diet of live insects and not be a problem, unless of course someone disturbs their nest. All social wasps will defend their nests aggressively if they feel threatened.

Midway through the summer, I expect to see many soldier beetles, particularly on flowers of the daisy family. They are elongated beetles having predominantly yellow wing covers with black markings.

They feed on pollen but also on soft-bodied insects such as aphids, leafhoppers and small insect larvae.

One of my friends welcomes the arrival of this beetle because she then notices a decrease in the number of cucumber beetles in her garden.

Ground beetles shy away from light and live mainly under mulch and rocks. They are quite large, with shiny wing covers, and are tireless hunters.

Some even climb trees at night in search of insects. I usually spot them when I am working the soil - but it is just a glimpse as they scurry away, disappearing into the nearest hiding place.



**2 Soldier beetle on Rudbeckia**

The lacewing, another gardener's friend, is common enough but it is so delicate I only ever catch sight of one when it flies off, or when I see them at night attracted by outdoor lights. I have yet to observe its larva, commonly called the aphid lion. It feeds on other insects as well as aphids and has a large pair of hooked jaws at the front of the head giving it a rather menacing appearance. I can't miss the buzzing bumble bees and I pause to watch as they emerge, often dusted with pollen, from the flowers they visit. They are greatly valued for the pollination work they do as they industriously fill the pollen baskets located on their back legs.

All these encounters reassure me that my garden is alive and well with nature at work in every corner. To entice more of these beneficial insects to stay in my garden, I always include small islands of flowers that are known to be especially attractive to them. I plant sweet alyssum, proven to be a very effective magnet for a diversity of useful insects. Other favoured flowers include cosmos, coreopsis, sunflowers and yarrow. Herbs such as borage, spearmint and thyme, plus many of the carrot family like coriander, dill, chervil, and fennel are also excellent. Here and there, I also place shallow dishes of water, with pebbles for convenient landing, so they will have a place to drink.

If you are curious to learn to recognize some of the bugs mentioned above, look up the following web page: <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/catalog/pdf/ec/ec1613-e.pdf>.

## **Beneficial insects in our gardens**

### **Ladybugs**

Their larvae look like colourful mini-alligators.

### **Hover Flies**

They feed on nectar while their larvae feast on aphids and other similar small insects.

### **Wasps – Ichneumon and Braconid**

They parasitize many caterpillars.

### **Wasps – tiny and fatal**

They parasitize eggs and larvae of other insects.

### **Soldier beetles**

They like pollen but also feed on small insects.

### **Lacewings**

Their larva, the aphid lion, lives up to its name.

### **Ground beetles**

They are shy, live in dark places and are tireless hunters of insects.

Make your garden more attractive to them

by planting small islands of the following:

sweet alyssum, cosmos, sunflower, coreopsis;

herbs like spearmint, borage and thyme; and members of the carrot family such as dill, coriander, fennel, and chervil.