

NORTHWOODS YARD & GARDEN

Weekly Column

February 19, 2024

Beneficial Insects for Pest Control

Beneficial insects can play a significant role in managing yard and garden pest insects. This does not mean just order ladybugs and release them in your plantings this coming season, however. Instead, consider what these insects can and cannot do along with how to attract them to your yard and garden in 2024.

Beneficial insects fall into one of two broad groupings: predators and parasitoids. Predators are usually larger than their prey and consume it. Examples include ladybugs, ground beetles, lacewings, syrphid flies, and praying mantids. Parasitoids are typically the same size or smaller than their prey. Rather than consuming, they usually lay eggs into the host pest insect and develop inside the pest itself, eventually killing it. Many parasitoids are small non-stinging wasps.

What beneficials feed on determines how desirable they are for pest management. Ladybugs are very desirable, as both adult beetles and larva feed heavily on soft-bodied pests such as aphids, scale nymphs, whiteflies, and similar insects. Praying mantids, certainly remarkably interesting predators to watch, are less desirable generalist feeders, eating whatever they can catch. This includes pests but also beneficials, including pollinators, and even each other.

Rather than purchasing beneficials and releasing them outdoors, work to enhance naturally occurring species that exist in our area. Encouraging them to develop in your yard and garden can help reduce pest problems, especially aphids, scales, and mites. Providing a stable environment using perennial plantings is the most effective way to build populations of beneficial insects. Avoiding broad spectrum insecticide sprays will help them flourish.

Many adult beneficial insects, including lacewings and syrphid flies, are readily attracted to pollen and nectar. Providing flowers in bloom for much of the season is extremely helpful in encouraging them to start residence in your yard. Adults will lay eggs that hatch into larva, which oftentimes are very efficient at feeding on pest insects.

Identifying the various stages of beneficial insect life cycles presents a challenge. For example, adult ladybugs are familiar to us, yet the alligator-like larva are often mistaken as pests. There are numerous helpful printed and online references available on these fascinating insects; start online with California IPM Natural Enemies Gallery.

Natural pest control through use of beneficial insects may not solve all plant pest problems but can be significant. Take time over the remainder of winter to research them and be ready to assist them to help you battle insect pests in the 2024 gardening season!

Interested in learning more about
Horticulture in Iron County?
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