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INSECT BALANCE IN OUR GARDENS (Part 2)

Last month we discussed the reasons for a doubling of the percentage of crops lost to insects and disease within the last 50 years. Those reasons being 1) loss of soil fertility, 2) “fence row to fence row” clean cultivation, and 3) heavy and ill-timed use of pesticides. The last two are primarily responsible for the death of beneficial insects that used to keep the pests in check. Last month we learned to identify what type of pest is devouring our plants, so that we know what type of beneficial insect we want to attract to the garden. We will discuss how to attract the beneficials in this article.

All animals, including insects, need food, shelter, water and the right conditions to reproduce. Some plants attract beneficial insects. These plants may provide pollen and nectar, foliage for the larvae to feed on, or habitat for prey species. They all furnish food in some form.

The beneficial insects that we want to attract are: Ladybug, Tachinid fly, Minute Pirate bug, Hoverfly, Parasitic wasps, Big-eyed bugs, and Lacewing. Some plants attract only one of the beneficial insect species, such as the Hoverfly to English Lavender and the Lacewing to Angelica. However, many plants attract a variety of these beneficials to one plant. Some of these are: fennel, basket of gold, buckwheat, crimson thyme, dill, fern leaf yarrow, marigold, hairy vetch, parsley, lemon balm, zinnia, and maximilian sunflower. (I have a list of 53.) Many of these plants serve other purposes, such as food (herbs) or medicine.

The predator and parasitic insects will not hang around if they do not have prey to feast on. Providing hedge rows or weedy spots harbor aphids and other prey, and provide food for the beneficials. Remember you need a few pests to keep the beneficials around.

The beneficials also need a place to stay and will not stay around if they don't have one. Try to incorporate dense foliage, mulch, leaves, rock piles, and walls into your garden design. Shrubs, hedges, and thick perennial beds are ideal. Many beneficial insects overwinter or lay eggs in dead vegetation, so you should delay your postseason cleanup until spring.

In addition to providing food, shelter and moisture, food also needs to be available at the right time. Try to grow many species of flowers so that several types are always in bloom. This gives the insects a better chance of fattening up so they can breed.

As you can see, the plant – insect relationship is complex. Each one balances the other and also other factors in our environment. There is a distinct advantage to using native plants in your gardens. The relationships have been honed over thousands of years and are continuing to perfect.

Many garden supply stores sell beneficial insects and that is one way to get them. But, if you do not have the food, shelter, water and the right conditions, the beneficials will leave for greener pastures. To attract beneficial insects, plant the right type of flowers and provide habitat and “they will come”. Diversity and soil health are the keys.



Left: Hairy Vetch and Crimson Clover: Ladybugs, Minute Pirate bugs, Lacewings



Right: Fern Leaf Yarrow: Ladybugs, Hoverfly, parasitic wasps, Lacewings



Lemon Balm: Tachinid fly, Hoverfly, Parasitic wasps