

# HORTICULTURE HAPPENINGS

TEXAS AGRILIFE EXTENSION RANDALL COUNTY

## NATURE'S LITTLE WARRIORS

"Bugs, beetles and wasps. Oh MY!" If this statement speaks to you, I hope to shed some much needed light into our insect world before you take one look and assume it needs to be squashed.

First, let's understand the categories; pest and non-pest insects. Pest are those insects that cause harm (plant harm) and non-pest are those that provide a positive benefit or contribute no negative impact on plants. The number of pest versus insects as a whole, pest insects only make up **5%** of the total percentage of insects. This means the next time you see an insect, chances are it is simply a "bug being a bug" and should be left alone.

As gardeners, we want our plants to be pest free. Much like we are as new parents, we shield our plants (babies) from anything seemingly harmful to keep it in the best growing condition. Too often one Aphid or Caterpillar on our rose bushes sends us looking for insecticide in a genuine attempt to be the perfect gardener. (Aphids are soft bodied insects with a piercing/sucking mouthpiece that if left alone will wreak havoc on our ornamental plants.) However, nature has amazing warriors, also known as beneficial insects that were created to help the gardener if we can be patient and allow them to do their job. So, let's all practice our patience and let these little warriors do the fighting for us.

**Lady Beetle:** Most of us played with "lady bugs" when we were children never knowing their positive impact. Interestingly, Lady Beetles can live up to a year and will eat around 5,000 Aphids. Not only will the adult Lady Beetle eat aphids but the larvae stage as well. The larvae stage of the Lady Beetle looks dramatically different than the adult often mistaken as a pest. If you happen to see the larvae of a Lady Beetle (pictured), for heaven's sake, leave it alone.



**Parasitic Wasp:** Don't be alarmed by the Wasp title. Chances are you will never notice the parasitic wasp because it is so tiny (think super skinny house fly). The wasp stings the Aphid or Caterpillar and deposits between 200-300 eggs inside the Aphid. The eggs hatch and eat the pest from the inside out. When the wasps have run out of space inside the mummified pest, they will cut a perfect circle in the abdomen and escape to carry on the battle. More than likely you will notice the mummified carcass before you ever see the Parasitic Wasp.



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**Lace Wing:** The adult Lace Wing does not control Aphids but the larvae, which look even more menacing than Lady Beetle Larvae, eat aphids at a rate 20X that of the Lady Beetle! Consuming around 500 Aphids a week! If you see these larvae with alligator like mouths, just smile and carry on.



**Preying Mantis:** You have probably seen these and know how aggressive they can be (hints the name). In fact, they have poor eyesight and will basically eat whatever they come in contact with. That may be an Aphid, Beetle or even another Mantis. The Mantis egg sack, called an Ootheca can look alarming but if you spot one of these, relax and know that Mother Nature has your back.



Enjoy these last few weeks of spring and when you are in your garden, look for these warriors, give them a figurative “high five” and let them warrior on. As always, happy planting!

