Beneficial Insects

Not all insects are pests! “Beneficial insects” actually help gardeners by naturally managing pest populations. They are classified as either predators who consume pests or parasites who live in or off of a pest until its death. Predators are usually general feeders who consume many different types of pests, while parasites are specific, usually working to control only one target pest.

Gardeners can promote effective pest management by attracting and protecting beneficial insects. The first step in enticing natural predators to nest in your garden is to stop using pesticides. Beneficial insects are often much less tolerant of pesticides than the destructive insects that you hope to kill in your garden, and you can do a disservice to the ecosystem by unintentionally eliminating natural predators. Second, planting a diverse mix of flowers and herbs among your veggies will provide food and shelter for beneficial insects. Plants with small flowers (like yarrow and dill) are often rich in nectar. Some “weeds”, like Queen Anne’s lace and dandelions, are favorites of honeybees, ladybugs, and other garden helpers – it helps to leave a few behind when weeding your plot. Also provide a small “insect bath” with gravel “islands” for a fresh water source on the hottest days of summer. Finally, if you are short on space and dedicating every inch of your garden to food production, try to include vegetables and herbs that will sustain natural predators. Among these are thyme, parsley, dill, carrots, cabbage, broccoli, kale, mustard, and radishes. Below are some of the most common beneficial insects to watch for in your garden:

**Honey Bees:** Though neither predator nor parasite, honey bees are important for pollinating garden plants and ensuring a productive season. Honey bees are attracted to a variety of flowers (clover, marigolds, sunflowers, zinnia), herbs (fennel, lavender, mint, rosemary, sage, thyme), and vegetables (melons, pumpkins, squash, strawberries).

**Hoverflies / Syrphid Flies:** Hoverflies mimic wasps but are harmless to humans. Their larvae, however, are voracious predators of aphids and thrips. Adult hoverflies are also helpful in pollination. To attract them, grow chamomile, parsley, or marigolds.
**Lacewings:** Lacewing larvae will attack aphids, mealybugs, and small caterpillars. Gardeners can lure them with dill, as well as cornflowers and cosmos.

**Ladybugs:** A single ladybug can consume 50 to 60 aphids a day. Adult ladybugs and their black and orange larvae also feed on mites and scale insects. Favorite plants include caraway, carrots, cilantro, dill, fennel, and yarrow.