

2007 AWARD OF MERIT WINNER

Aphids, Ladybugs & Other Players by Dorothy Wall, C.R.

As you walk through the garden there's a whole world of activity going on - much of it often un-noticed and unseen. Nature keeps things pretty well in balance - as long as she doesn't have too much interference from us well-meaning gardeners. The game (or battle) between pest & predator, between eat or be eaten goes on and may the best player win!

Admittedly, there are times when we need to help out who we consider the 'good guys', but often with a little restraint and resistance to pushing the panic button, things get balanced out without resorting to dire means.

Case in point - aphids: For some reason aphids seem to be the number one woe of rose growers in the spring. They cause otherwise reasonable people to run screaming for the insecticide, which is, in my opinion, like using a cannon to kill a fly. True, aphids are very destructive to your roses and should not be ignored. They feed by sucking the sap from the plants, enjoying both leaves and buds. Damage is not readily apparent but causes a gradual weakening of the plant and distortion of the bloom. They can also spread viruses.

Another problem is caused by the excretion of 'honeydew' which ferments into a moldy mess, cutting off sunlight to the leaves. Ants love this sticky substance and being the industrious critters that they are, will often create 'farms' where they literally herd the aphids for their convenience. If you notice ants busily scrambling around the base of your rose bush, give them an eviction notice!

But wait - there's help on the way! If aphids arrive, lady bugs are not far behind. In fact they often arrive first and lie in wait. I noticed a few today in my garden and so far see no aphids on the tender new growth on my roses.



Eggs of Ladybugs on the underside of a leaf. Photo by Baldo Villegas

Ladybugs have voracious appetites and can clean up large amounts of aphids in no time. As with many beneficial insects, the larvae eat more than the adults (think teenager). Ladybug larvae remind me of tiny alligators with their orange stripes and slightly rough edges. Be familiar with these - they are friends, not foe. Notice also the white flaky specks which are just the 'leavings' as they shed their skins for the next stage of growth.

Other helpers are on the hunt for aphids; Soldier Beetles, identifiable by their red/orange head and thorax with a black or greenish body, wage a constant war on aphids. There are several species.



Photo by Baldo Villegas

The larvae of the syrphid or hover fly is often mistaken for a tiny green caterpillar.



Larvae of the syrphid fly. Photo by Baldo Villegas

A yellow stripe down its back will tell you that aphids are on its menu. If you stand and watch you will see it raising its wee head and actually tossing down the juice from an aphid like a shot of vodka!

Lacewing larvae are predators of aphids; there is also a parasitic wasp that has a different but effective approach; it lays its eggs inside caterpillars so that its offspring is assured of an easy meal when they hatch out.

Small birds feed on aphids. I noticed last year when we had so many goldfinches, they were often seen perching on the roses, supplementing the thistle seed with juicy tidbits.

If you have a large infestation of aphids and feel that things are out of control, just use a strong spray of water from the garden hose - most aphids don't have wings and cannot get back up into the plants. Soap can be added to water in a sprayer but usually just water works fine.

Resist using the 3-in-1 products that are so heavily advertised. You can't expect any help from the beneficial insects if you poison them before they have a chance to show you what they can do. Don't assume that all insects are up to no good - take time to observe, take a second look. What is that insect actually doing on that rose leaf or bud?

Most of the time you will see that it is a harmless and helpful beneficial friend. Luckily there seems to be more of the good guys than the bad. I can only think of a few that are really destructive to roses in our area. Thank goodness, we don't have Japanese beetles! Curculio beetles are some you definitely can't tolerate and there are a few others that need to be shown the door out. Some others we have to live with because insecticides won't work anyway, (*i.e. raspberry horntail, grasshoppers*).

But mostly insects are there for a reason; they have a function in the overall health of the garden. Remember insecticides are not selective in what they kill. Birds can also be killed by eating poisoned insects.

Gardens are a minute example of the complexity of nature - take time to be an observer to the drama going on out there!