

## A celebration of bugs

*By the Nebraska Statewide  
Arboretum*

I like bugs. I think they're fascinating and fun to watch and I like knowing that they do so much good for us. I didn't always think that way. I can distinctly remember as a child being mostly afraid of bugs, which is probably our natural inclination.

Get stung by a bee or get sucked on by a tick and it's just natural to start being a bit leery of our creepy crawly friends. But I also know we aren't born being afraid of insects. My older brother was quite the connoisseur of June bugs when he was a toddler. He ate them like they were M&Ms, enjoying the crunchy outer shell that covered the goodness inside. Mmmm.

Over time I worked my way past my fears and came to realize that bugs aren't only cool, we really couldn't live without them. Just think about it. If we didn't have bees and other important pollinators we wouldn't be able to eat apples or tomatoes or chocolate or many of the most important foods in our diets. And if we didn't have plant-eating insects, plants would never be recycled back into nutrient cycle.

If we didn't have lady beetles and spiders and other crawling predators, our gardens and landscapes would be overrun with plant-eating insects. And if we didn't have butterflies, our world would be so much less colorful. And if we didn't have dung beetles... well let's just say "it" would be getting quite deep around here.

Once you start looking at the chain of associations between arthropods (insects and spiders) and the world around us, it becomes very clear that we should be singing their praises. Of course some insects cause real problems in the garden. Bagworms, aphids, lace bugs, ticks and cucumber beetles are just a few of them.

Foreign invaders such as emerald ash borer and Japanese beetle are headed our way and will likely cause major problems in the landscape. But anyone thinking that we should try to spray our way out of this is not thinking about the chain of associations. Sure we can spray the bagworms, but what about the chickadees that like to eat bagworms? Was it worth poisoning them? I've been gardening and caring for landscapes now for most of my adult life and I long ago put away the insecticides deciding it's just not worth killing many beneficial or benign insects and other animals when trying to control an occasional pest or two. Many organic gardeners have figured out that a healthy garden is a home to a wide diversity of bugs.

It's late July as I write this and I just came in from looking at insects in my own garden. Of course there were some I'm not fond of such as lacebugs, aphids, grasshoppers and blister beetles. But I also found a grand menagerie of important species helping me out including lady beetles, praying mantids, soldier beetles, assassin bugs, lacewings and all kinds of spiders. And I found many other fascinating creatures that were just fun to look at including several butterflies, dragonflies, milkweed beetles, scarab beetles, cicadas (and cicada killers), hawk moths, syrphid flies, ants, millipedes and sow bugs. The list really does go on and on.

Something we've finally come to realize is that by including more native plants in the garden, along with some important non-natives, we can attract a wide range of beneficial insects that help minimize the damage of pest species. Anyone wishing to learn more about insects in the garden, why they are so important and why we should use more native plants to help support them, would do well to read a great book by Doug Tallamy called "Bringing Nature Home". This eye-opening book helps shine the light on the importance of insects and how native plants help sustain wildlife in our gardens and landscapes. I promise you'll be glad you read it.

Oh hey, there goes a butterfly. See you later.