

# WHAT BUGS ME ABOUT INSECTS - A STORY OF CHANGE

*by Ronnie Brancazio*

*Once upon a time* when I was a new gardener (let's say 50 years ago), it was general garden wisdom that many insects were THE ENEMY, and should be destroyed by whatever means available. That meant sprays, powders, pellets, or other heavy artillery. Start early in the season and reapply often! The main enemies that I personally dealt with were Japanese beetles, aphids, white fly, slugs and snails, budworms, also the occasional grasshopper. This approach was recommended in books, articles, garden centers, and word-of-mouth, and thus taken by me as received wisdom.



Over the years, the trend has gradually shifted, along with the overall philosophy of how and why we garden. Beauty and enjoyment are still our motivators, but we now see our personal gardens as part of the wider world of nature, cultivation, and ecology. And that means looking at insects through very different eyes, especially in terms of inviting and protecting pollinators, but also thinking about how so many other insects are vital parts of the animal food chain.

I have been considering the insects that I see, enjoy, avoid, or need to manage in my own garden, and what I've learned to do about them. Not only do I find helpful advice in the newer books, articles, garden centers and word-of-mouth, but thanks to these same venues I have been learning a lot of fascinating information about various insects, and I have been surprised at how drastically my own attitude toward them has changed!

First is the YUCK factor. I used to find most insects (except for ladybugs of course) either scary or repulsive, and surely untouchable. You should see me now! I'd say the only garden creature that I absolutely cannot touch is the slug, because - let's face it - they really are disgusting! I now look at most other creepy-crawlies as fascinating and sometimes beautiful.

One reason I've changed my attitude is that several of our LIHS Speakers have taught us about the amazing behavioral and structural complexity of all insects, even the tiniest. The tiny fruit fly is the



workhorse of biological research because they reproduce so rapidly and carry easily identified genetic traits.

Spiders are totally amazing in what they do, and we all know about the social skills of ants! I also came to realize that there is a whole bunch of scientists - Etymologists - who not only study but actually LOVE their specimens! So I should try a little harder!

Also, there are many fascinating articles and videos enlightening us about the insect world. Most recently, I saw an article in Scientific Magazine entitled "Do Insects Feel Joy and Pain", and alas the answer is YES! So we need to think twice before spraying or squashing, for sure.

Now that we have a new admiration and respect for insects, that still leaves us with the problem of them munching on our gardens, so what are we to do? My personal approach is two-pronged, namely:

- (1) Change my Garden
- (2) Change my Attitude and Expectations.

(1) The main way I've **changed my garden** is to remove plants that insects see as a "salad bar" and replace them with equally attractive plants that are "off-putting" to problem insects. Since I am gradually moving away from annuals to perennials for my in-ground gardens, this seems to happen naturally, since it's been my experience that many of



the popular annuals are the worst offenders. That leaves only snails and slugs for those flower beds. Snails I can pick up and move elsewhere, but slugs I have to leave alone! Fortunately this has not been a bad summer for them, but I don't have a solution.

At the same time, I try to find perennials that are attractive to pollinators, so the new acquisitions do double-duty.

I do still plant colorful annuals in my window boxes and hanging planters, and there I still have to cope with my old foes - aphids, whitefly and budworm. The worst offenders are million bells (aphid and whitefly), and petunias and geraniums (budworms). For the first ones, I

have found that the suggestion of a stiff hosing of water really works, and lasts a while - until I have to do it again. For the budworms though, it's a different story, which leads to:

(2) **Change my Attitude**. First of all, I *could* just stop planting petunias and geraniums - but I love them both, common though they may be. They are so beautiful. Second, I have reconsidered budworms, which are actually little caterpillars which will turn into helpful moth pollinators, so I should not be killing them! This summer I experimented with the "*live and let live*" approach; that is, I planted petunias in my window boxes and geraniums in pots on the steps, and did nothing but feed them. Sure enough, I got plenty of budworms, but to my pleasant surprise I still had plenty of intact flowers to enjoy! In other words, we reached a "*negotiated settlement*" which satisfied both sides.

There is one more category of outdoor insects which doesn't involve our gardens, but does involve *us*, namely flying pests like mosquitos! I happen to be one of those fortunate people who isn't very tasty to mosquitos, but I have guests who are, and it's very unpleasant to have them buzzing around, regardless. I have read that an electric fan will drive them away, but you can't always set that up. I just invested in a neat little battery-run device (recommended by the NY Times Wirecutter product reviewer) called Thermacell Mosquito Repellent which is supposed to keep them away. Just tried it once and it seemed to work - ask me again in a month! The other flying pest that I have in abundance this summer is yellow jackets, and they DO STING. I must have a nest somewhere but don't want to go searching! I know they are also pollinators but I would rather not share my yard with them!

So that's the latest on me and my bugs! I'd love to hear about your ways of coping!

\*Editor's note: Slug solutions to try: companion planting with plants slugs hate: Alliums, chives, fennel, mint, geraniums, and foxgloves. Things you can put around your plants to protect them, crushed eggshells, seaweed, sand or gravel, all safe and some beneficial for your soil. Beer traps: sink a small cup with about 1 inch or so of cheap beer you would never drink, around their favorite plants, like hosta or seedlings. Slugs are drawn to the smell crawl in and drown. Copper wire around sensitive plants will give them an electric shock when they try to crawl over it.