Master Gardener Newspaper

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Tulare/Kings Counties

How Can You ID That Bug?

by Anne Skinner, UC Master Gardener

Master Gardeners are often asked to identify insects which homeowners have noticed in their yards. An invasion of insects on your plants or trees is understandably concerning. How can you narrow down the suspects and determine if it is a pest or a beneficial insect in your garden? How can you provide the best management plan?

Is it a pest? First, if the insect is on a plant or a tree, identifying the plant will provide clues to the insect. If you do not know the name of the plant, bring a picture or a few small branches with undamaged leaves in a sealed container or zip lock bag to the Master Gardener office or to the Master Gardener booth at the Saturday Farmer's Market in Visalia.

Look to the leaves for clues. Second, note any damage the insect is causing to the leaves of the plant. Some insects are on the plant to collect pollen or nectar for their nourishment and do not chew on the leaves. Many insects are on the plant to consume other insects. Aphids are on the menu for many beneficial insects: lady beetles, syrphid flies, lacewings and their larvae. Leafcutter bees chew pieces off the border of the leaves to line their nest and are not damaging the plant.

Many insects have identifiable feeding patterns on leaves, such as citrus leaf miners which leave trails on the surface of the leaf. Insects can often be found hiding on the under surface of leaves to avoid predators. Check the leaves of the plant using a magnifying glass for evidence of the insect or frass (insect waste). Many worms and caterpillars leave black specks of frass on leaves.

University of California Integrated Pest Management has answers. The third step is to go to the Master Gardener web site (*http://cetulare.ucanr.edu*), select Master Gardener, then UC Gardening and PEST Information. In Pest Information and Plant Care, choose the type of plant you are researching. Listed under each tree or plant is a list of potential pests and examples of pest damage, along with a detailed description of the pest and recommended management procedures.

Under Integrated Pest Management (IPM) click on the UC IPM Home Page. The "What's New" column has a Plant Problem diagnostic tool which walks you through the steps to identify and manage plant or tree problems.

Why take the time to identify a bug?
Some pests, such as a hoplia beetle on roses, are present and active for only 2-4 weeks of the year. Attempting to spray them with an insecticide is difficult because they hide in the blooms, and the insecticide will kill beneficial insects such as lady beetles and bees. The loss of lady beetles will then lead to an increase in aphid infestation. The UC IPM Pest Note for hoplia beetle advises instead shaking the beetles off the plant into soapy water to reduce their number until they fly away for the year.

Many insects which feed on plant leaves do not cause significant harm to a mature plant or tree. A strong stream of water early in the day from a garden hose will dislodge the insects and make them more vulnerable to

their "natural enemies", insect predators. Check under the plant leaves in particular to wash them all off of the plant. There are many "natural enemies" of insects including other insect species, spiders, birds and lizards. Insectaries raise predatory (beneficial) insects including lady beetles, predatory mites, praying mantis, lacewing larvae, leaf miner parasite, pirate bugs and others for use in pest control. Adding beneficial insects to the garden environment is sometimes an option.

Adult Hoplia Beetle on rose – Hoplia beetles on roses are present and active for only 2 – 4 weeks of the year.

Identifying insects can take a little time, but it is worth the investment if the insect has the potential to damage important plants and trees in your garden. It is essential to utilize the safest and most effective management techniques to prevent further damage. If a pesticide is recommended in the UC IPM Pest Note, read all the precautions and application techniques on the product. Read the Pest Note: "Pesticides: Safe and Effective Use in the Home and Landscape." (*http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn74126.html)*

Identifying the insects in your garden is interesting, and we gardeners can all learn a bit of Entomology, the branch of science that deals with the study of insects. Always remember those little creatures are not all "creepy crawlies" which need to be destroyed. Learning which insects are true pests, which can be tolerated, and which are beneficial is an important part of gardening.
For answers to all your home gardening questions, call Master Gardeners in Tulare County at (559) 684-3325, Tuesdays and Thursdays between 9:30 and 11:30 am; or Kings County at (559) 852-2736, Thursday Only, 9:30-11:30 a.m.; or visit our website: http:cetulare.ucdavis.edu.

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