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SUMMARY

Sometimes insects are not to blame for chewed leaves. Other creatures have appetites too, including some of our favorite birds, like goldfinches.

Beautiful Birds Munch Zinnia Leaves

By Emma Connery, UC Master Gardener Program Coordinator

Hang feeders or prepare to share!

Q. I have a zinnia that is in full bloom right now and looking beautiful, but a number of leaves up toward the top have been horribly chewed. I have looked all over for some kind of insect but I don't find anything. Can you tell me what is eating the leaves and what can I do about it?

A. Your leaves indeed have been horribly chewed, right down to the main veins. I recognized that type of damage right away. It is very common on sunflowers, but this is the first time I have seen it on zinnias. It is not an insect at all but birds — goldfinches..

I am not a bird specialist, so I cannot say for sure what kind of goldfinches. I have read that goldfinches eat primarily seeds but augment their diet with certain plant parts and insects. The UC Master Gardener Program of Contra Costa County operates an edibles demonstration project in Walnut Creek, and last year we had the same situation but on our sunflowers.

When there was a lot of activity in the garden with volunteers gardening and harvesting, there was nary a bird in sight. As the activity slowed down and only a few humans remained to close up, the birds would start to gather, sitting on the fence — lots of them — chirping like crazy. When humans were gone, feasting began. It did not matter if the leaves were at the top of the plant or the bottom; the leaves were eaten so completely that only the main veins remained, no longer recognizable as a leaf at all except for its framework still hanging on the plant.

Quite honestly, I don't know how you could manage this situation and now, knowing the source of the problem, that you would even want to.

Many people hang bird feeders full of seed to attract goldfinches to their garden and all you need to do is share your zinnias. Simply enjoy the fact that these beautiful creatures have paid you a visit.



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Photo courtesy of Joan Morris & *Times* staff.
Damage to this zinnia leaf wasn’t caused by insects but goldfinches.