

**The Press Democrat
September 02, 2023**

ADVICE TO GROW BY » SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS
**Build winter hotel for bugs and September in the
Garden**



**A bug hotel will shelter beneficial insects over the winter and encourage
“good” insects that feed on garden pests.**

Question: What are beneficial insects, and how can my family help them stay safe in the winter?

Answer: Beneficial insects garden along with you to help your plants thrive.

The larva stage (the young) of many beneficial insects, such as ladybugs, hoverflies, parasitic wasps and lacewings, eat large numbers of insect pests. Adults of these “good” bugs also devour pests (ladybugs love aphids) and pollinate plants in your garden.

To help them do their job, provide them with plants that bloom from spring through fall. That will encourage beneficial insects and help reduce undesirable insect pests naturally. Avoid using pesticides in your garden that will kill beneficial insects along with the pests you’re targeting. Instead, let them remove the pests for you.

You also can make a shelter for beneficial insects to spend the winter. Insects need safe spaces to hide from their enemies, raise their young and shelter from the cold weather. By creating these spaces and shelters, you’ll see an increase of beneficial insects of all types in your garden.

Here are some shelters you can make to protect beneficial insects this winter:

Bug hotels

Bug hotels can house varieties of native solitary bees and other insects. There are many types of shelters, from elaborate hotels to small homes that don’t take up a lot of room. You can build your hotel any time of the year, but fall is ideal because nature provides lots of materials you need to make your shelter, such as twigs and leaves. It’s also the time many beneficial insects look for places to safely overwinter.

You can build a bug hotel out of a wooden box, such as a crate with partitions used to carry beverages. Because the box needed to be safe for food, you know it’ll be safe for insects, too. Decide where you’re going to put your hotel, considering where you want your insects to hatch. It should be a warm, sheltered location that protects the box from wind and rain. Exposure to morning sun is best.

Turn the box on its side or stand it on bricks or concrete blocks 5 to 8 feet off the ground. You can also attach it to a fence. Make sure it’s secure. Good insect hotels should be sturdy, with a solid back and roof to protect it from rain.

Now comes the fun part: Collect materials such as twigs, leaves, grasses, pine cones, tree bark and hollow stems. Divide your box into sections and stuff each one with natural materials to provide warm, dry spaces for your beneficial insects. This is a good space for ladybugs; bees (particularly the solitary bees like mason bees and leaf-cutter bees); spiders; lacewings; and beetles. To promote sustainability, consider using recycled or natural materials from your garden. Using your own materials also means

your insect hotel is made of natural, untreated wood without chemicals such as varnish, paint and wood protectant.

During the winter, you can carefully peek into your hotel to see who's living there, but don't move things around or you'll scare the insects away.

Pine cones: Another way to build a home for beneficial insects is to collect a bunch of pine cones and bundle them together by interlocking their scales. Use dried leaves to stuff in the spaces of the pine cones. Place your pine cone bundle in a sheltered area of your garden or near a shed or garage. Lacewings and ladybugs love hiding among the leaves.

Twigs: Gather twigs of different sizes and find a spot to keep them dry. Stand them up or make a pile, then fill the gaps with grasses, leaves and smaller twigs. Ladybugs really like this kind of shelter.

Log piles: Decaying wood provides lots of shelter for insects and wildlife. Collect different sizes of logs, wood and sticks. Pile them up in a shady, moist area of your garden. Stuff the empty spaces between the logs with leaves, grasses and more rotting wood. Many beneficial beetles rely on places like this for shelter.

Flowerpots: Use an old terra cotta — not plastic — pot to make a shelter for ground bees. Collect lots of dried hollow stems and pack them into your flowerpot. Use small rocks and stones to stabilize the pot. Be sure it's placed sideways and facing partially downward so it won't gather rain. Look for a dry place, such as under an overhang, that gets some sun. The bees will go into the hollow stems and seal them with mud to overwinter.

Leaf piles: Leaf piles, raked carefully along paths below trees, shelter caterpillars, which become vital soft food that adult birds feed their young.

These are all ideas your family can do together to help keep insects safe over winter. By building homes, you'll see an increase of beneficial insects of all types in your garden. Pollinators such as bees and butterflies and predators such as ladybugs and soldier beetles will take up residence and help your plants flourish.

September in garden

Remove summer garden vegetable plants that are no longer producing. Cut the plants just below the soil line, leaving their roots to decompose in place. Completely remove plants that show signs of disease and discard them in your green waste bin. If plants show no sign of disease, you can add them to your home compost pile.

Energize your garden soil for a fall and winter garden by adding 1 to 2 inches of aged, composted organic matter on top of the existing soil. You don't need to dig the compost in. Add an insulating layer of mulch, at least 1 inch deep, to help retain moisture, moderate soil temperature and enhance water retention.

Plant cool-season crops like broccoli, kale, peas, carrots, lettuce and spinach. If September is hot, set out fall/winter vegetable transplants later in the afternoon and use a row cover for a week or two to protect tender seedlings from hot sun. If possible, try to time transplanting vegetable starts to coincide with the start of a cooler weather cycle, then watch to make sure they have adequate water when the temperatures rise.

Plant California natives, generally after the rains begin. Look through our page on California natives at bit.ly/44Ov237 and pick the right plants for you. Native plant sales offer numerous species, such as *Arctostaphylos*, *Ceanothus* and *Rhamnus* for structure; and *Ribes sanguineum*, native salvia, *Epilobium*, *Penstemon* and *Eriogonum* for color and to attract pollinators and other beneficial insects. When planting, always keep in mind one of the key principles of sustainable gardening — “right plant, right place.” Check that the location can accommodate both the plant’s size at maturity and the plant’s sun exposure needs.

Spring-flowering bulbs are now available in most nurseries and garden centers. It’s generally best to wait until after the first rains to plant them, but you can buy them now while there is a good selection. Store them in a cool, dry place until you’re ready to plant.

Clean your gutters and all areas where leaves, needles and debris accumulate, especially the 5-foot perimeter around your house. We are still in fire season.

Contributors to this week’s column were Ellen Samuel, Diane Judd, Joy Lanzendorfer and Debbie Westrick. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County, sonomamg.ucanr.edu, provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to scmgpd@gmail.com. You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707-565-2608 or mgsonoma@ucanr.edu.