

# The Only Good Bug ...

By Janet Allen

Does "... is a dead bug" come to mind?

When people think of insects, they usually picture a mosquito biting their arm, an annoying housefly buzzing in their kitchen, or swarms of little gnats that make it unpleasant to sit outside.

Yes, sometimes insects can be annoying, but they also provide many important services.

Something we all take for granted is that insects pollinate plants - including food crops. It has been estimated that we owe one of every three bites of food to the free pollination services of insects and other pollinators.

Another free service many insects provide is to help control those few types of insects that attack your plants. Insects are indeed an important part of healthy garden ecology. You can have a healthy, pesticide-free garden *because of* a wide variety of insects *not in spite of* them.

If you enjoy having birds in your yard, you'll find that insects will be a big attraction. And many insects can themselves be an appealing part of life outdoors. Butterflies are an obvious example, but dragonflies and damselflies are also fascinating and beautiful. In fact, as you begin to observe insects more carefully, you'll find that many small insects are interesting.

Here's how you can attract insects to your yard:

1. Plant a wide variety and quantity of plants, especially native varieties. Some good nectar sources are herbs and mints, brown-eyed susans, milkweeds, cosmos, sedum, joe pye-weed, purple coneflower, zinnias and others. But be aware that the showier, hybrid forms of these plants may not have as much nectar as the species versions.
2. Provide a source of water and mud, an essential ingredient for some insect nests.
3. Provide places to shelter and to escape predators. Good news! Your yard doesn't have to meet the same housekeeping standard as does your living room! Leaf litter, old logs, and rocks are good places for insects to hide. Leave "dead" plants standing during the winter.
4. Provide places to raise young. A bare patch of ground (rare in our lawn-dominated landscapes!), some dead branches and twigs left on trees, or even an official "bee house" can provide valuable nesting sites. Bee houses can be purchased or easily made at home.
5. Don't use pesticides. Ironically - in addition to adverse effects on human health - one of the worst consequences of insecticides is that they kill insects! Electric "bug zappers" are similarly harmful, and aren't even very effective at killing mosquitoes - the primary reason people use them.

Invite insects into your yard this summer and spend some time observing them. As you learn more about these creatures, you'll no longer believe that "the only good bug is a dead bug"!