

November in the Pollinator Garden
By Kathleen Harris

The blossoms of spring and summer have set their seed and gone to sleep. All of the insects that collected their pollen and nectar have moved in (bees overwinter as larvae or pupae underground or in hollow twigs or stems) or moved on (monarch butterflies, dragonflies, and milkweed bugs migrate each year). The garden, waiting for the winter rains, is dry and quiet. No mugwort flowers, no sticky monkeyflower blossoms, no pretty poppies with their feast of pollen for the bees.



But what is that shrub in the back, still covered with flowers? It's a female coyote brush (*Baccharis pilularis*), a member of the daisy family and native to the West Coast. It can grow up to about 10 feet and is often found in disturbed areas. It is dioecious, with male and female

flowers on separate plants. And it blooms, males first, then females, during the very driest part of the year, when no other resources are available, providing nectar for most of the predatory wasps, native [skippers](#) (small butterflies), and a bunch of native flies.



Male flowers are discoid and small, and female flowers release a seed that is attached to a pappus, a sort of little parachute. The pappi give the female flowers their furry appearance, hence, “coyote” brush.

This is where the insect action is in November. We find syrphid flies, Mexican cactus flies, and butterflies, mostly skippers.



Syrphid flies are beneficial insects in the garden. Visiting flowers of a wide range of plants for nectar and/or pollen, adult syrphid flies are good pollinators, second only to bees. In addition, many syrphid fly larvae are voracious predators of aphids. Flies in the genus *Helophilus* mimic yellow jacket wasps, complete with longitudinal stripes of yellow and black on the thorax and transverse bands on the abdomen.

The Mexican cactus fly, *Copestylum mexicanum*, is one of the largest syrphid flies in California. With a robust, glossy black body, the fly strongly resembles a carpenter bee when in flight. The fly gets its name from the larvae that feed in wet decaying prickly pear cactus.

Skippers are a family, Hesperiidae, of the Lepidoptera (butterflies and moths) order. Being diurnal, they are generally called butterflies and are named for their darting, erratic flight. Most

skippers are small to medium size, usually orange and tawny. They have antenna clubs hooked backward like a crochet hook. As caterpillars, most skippers feed on grasses, sedges, or rushes. Adults have long proboscises that they use to feed on floral nectar, but some also take up nutrients from bird droppings.

Let's hope for rain! But our western landscape evolved with these drought conditions, and the insects have had a lot of experience in getting by in challenging times. Next time you stroll past the FOSC Pollinator Garden, stand next to one of the coyote brushes and see if you can discover a visitor like the syrphid flies and skippers.