

Small Garden Allies

By Laura Veloz, Park Naturalist

Spring is the season in which we begin cultivating our vegetable or flower gardens, allowing these tender plants to flourish before the Texas summer heat scorches them past their wilting points. This period coincides with the emergence of insects that survived winter and now begin to thrive in ideal weather conditions. Therefore, it's to be expected that we will have six- and eight-legged critters visiting our gardens searching for food. Most of these small garden visitors are both beneficial and harmless. They form an integral part of our ecosystem. With thoughtful consideration of their presence, we may find a team of diverse allies that gives our gardens a fighting chance against other unwanted consumers.

Our small garden friends are grouped into three categories: pollinators, predators, and parasitoids. The most-recognizable species of insects fall into the pollinator category, including honeybees, native bees, butterflies, flies, and moths that visit flowers to feed on nectar and pollen. Pollinators are needed to transfer pollen within and between flowers and are essential to our garden's seed and fruit production.

Hunting along the vegetation are the beneficial predatory insects that indirectly defend our plants. Do not be alarmed if you see them. They are playing on our team, protecting our plants by consuming competitors that are harmful to plants and lowering the chances of an infestation. Ladybugs, green lacewings, spiders, wasps, and praying mantis are just a few of these garden predators. Most predatory insects are generalists, eating anything they can catch, even sometimes other garden friends.

There's another category reserved for helpful insects that defend our plants in what seems a macabre way. These six-legged invertebrates lay their eggs on other insects, and as those eggs hatch, the larvae consume their hosts alive. Parasitoids such as parasitic wasps and tachinid flies start their lives as parasites, in or on their prey, but they end up as predators, eating their hosts.

Beneficial insects are a valuable biological tool essential to a productive garden. They provide a free ecological service that is effective in foiling plant pests. We can create a welcoming habitat by limiting or avoiding the use of insecticides that blast everything in their path, killing not just the garden pests but affecting pollinators, predators, and parasitoids as well. These non-discriminatory chemicals create a vacuum of insect diversity, allowing plant-feasting insects to return and establish once again. Watching our spring gardens flourish is rewarding in so many ways, so why not rely on our small garden allies to help us reach our goals?



Bold jumping spider patiently awaiting its next meal. FWNC&R Staff Photo.