

BUGS IN THE BALANCE

STORY AND ILLUSTRATION BY HELEN KRAYENHOFF

On a beautiful spring day shortly after we moved into our new house, I noticed that the rosebuds on the bush in the front yard were literally covered in red aphids. I thought to myself, "I have to get out the insecticidal soap and blast those little buggers off there or they will ruin the first flowers." It was a busy time in the nursery so I didn't get around to it. Then one afternoon as I was walking by the roses, I noticed some flying beetles hopping around on the new growth. Stopping for a closer look, I found a bevy of orange-bellied beetles feasting on the aphids. They cleaned the bush in a few days and disappeared.

This incident was the start of a whole new perspective for me on bugs. Now I look at the aphids and instead of regarding them as delinquents vandalizing our gardens I ask, "Who will follow?" I've come to regard bugs as an important part of the garden community that I am part of as well.

When I pick up any nursery trade magazine, even an organic-leaning one, I see ads from companies promoting insecticides in which insects are categorized as 'bad bugs' and 'good bugs.' I also see options for purchasing beneficial insects from companies that dig hibernating ladybugs out of their nests in the Sierra and send them all across the country to 'battle' bad bugs in our gardens. The view from my own garden indicates that this kind of bug-running might not be

WHY AVOID PESTICIDES AND HERBICIDES?

In March, Annie Joseph, a consultant working with the Alameda Countywide Clean Water Program, gave an enlightening talk at Berkeley Horticultural Nursery on the subject of beneficial insects. She spoke about why reducing use of pesticides and herbicides in our gardens is important to the goal of controlling toxic runoff into our waterways, and pointed us toward many resources that are available to the home gardener interested in moving in the chemical-free direction. To learn more, go to OurWaterOurWorld.org.

necessary; we've never had trouble attracting ladybugs and keeping them hanging around, in part because of the previous owner's eight-year commitment to gardening without chemicals.

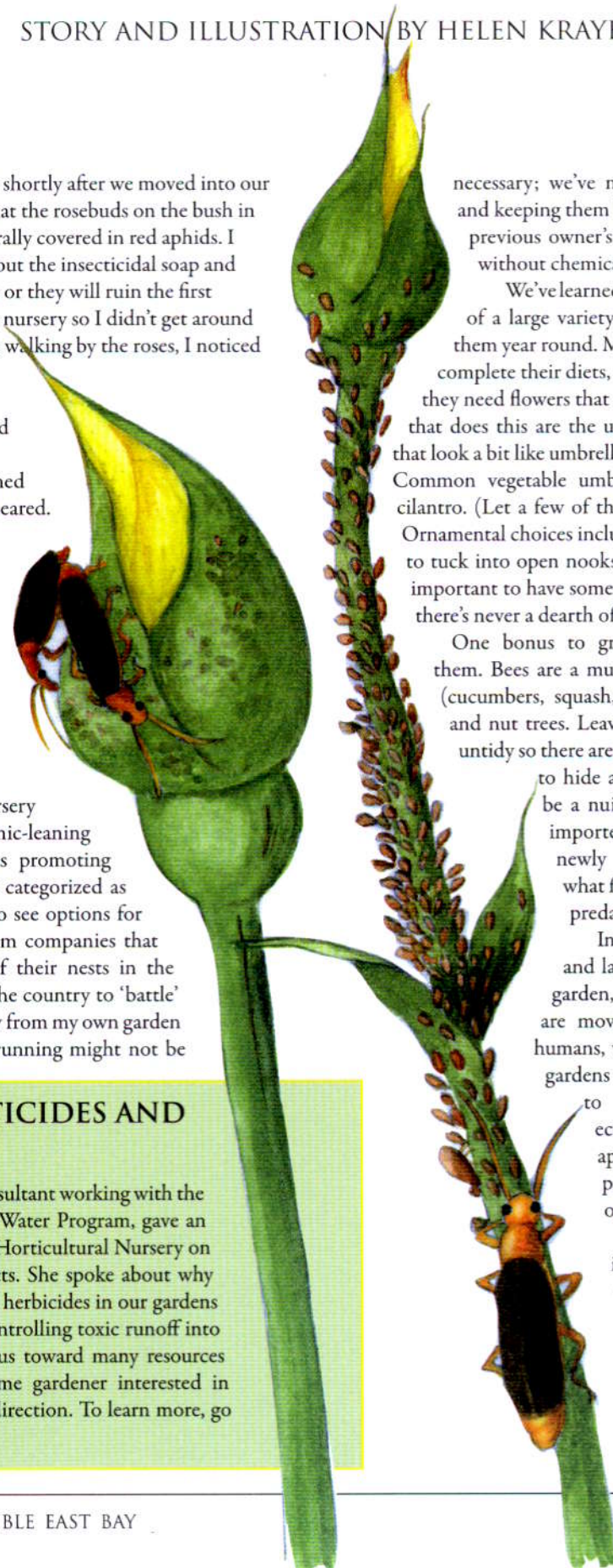
We've learned that the way to encourage the presence of a large variety of bugs is to have food available for them year round. Many carnivorous insects need nectar to complete their diets, and since they have small mouth parts, they need flowers that afford easy access. One group of plants that does this are the umbellifers, which have flower clusters that look a bit like umbrellas, making the name easy to remember. Common vegetable umbellifers include carrots, parsley, and cilantro. (Let a few of these flower to see the umbrella shape.) Ornamental choices include yarrow and alyssum, which are easy to tuck into open nooks and crannies in your veggie beds. It's important to have some aphids or other prey insects as well, so there's never a dearth of protein for the predator insects.

One bonus to growing umbellifers is that bees like them. Bees are a must for pollinating your cucurbit crops (cucumbers, squash, melons, etc.) as well as many fruit and nut trees. Leave parts of your garden a bit wild and untidy so there are places for frogs and other small critters to hide and bugs to overwinter. Raccoons can be a nuisance but they also love to eat those imported French snails that in turn love our newly planted seedlings. Who will get to what first? It's the constant push-pull of prey-predator that keeps the garden healthy.

In our culture we tend to oversimplify and label things 'good' and 'bad,' but in the garden, as in life, I try to learn whether things are moving toward balance. As enterprising humans, we work so hard at making our urban gardens look tidy or natural, according to our preferences, creating artificial ecosystems that we judge mostly by their appearance. If we can step back from our preconceptions and ideas and just be in our gardens, many things are revealed.

Spend time becoming more intimate with your garden community to learn how you can develop healthy relationships and be a positive member.

Feed your plants well but not too well: Overfed plants develop lots of soft, new green growth that's sweet and easy to chew on. Likewise, **water well** but not too much or too often.



“Feed the soil” is a useful mantra from the organic farmers: Work on amending your soil to create good drainage and active bacteria and invertebrate life. **Mulch and compost** added consistently will ensure that your soil has ample moisture and nutrients. Be still, don’t stress, don’t force, and see what your garden has to reveal.

This morning as I was thawing out in the sun, contemplating my rose bushes, a flock of bushtits landed in them and poked around looking for insects on the dark red new growth. Oscar the cat and I stood transfixed until they flew on to the abutilon (flowering maple) that always has a few aphids and also provides good cover for the tiny birds. Soon, when the buds appear on the roses, I hope the soldier beetles will come for their annual visit and there will be a feast of red aphids laid out for them. All I have to do is enjoy the event. The year in the garden continues.

FURTHER READING

Insects and Gardens:

In Pursuit of a Garden Ecology

by Eric Grissell, Timber Press, 2001

Here you’ll get an in-depth look at the lives of insects in the garden at a level you’ve probably not gone to before. It is an important new perspective that may help you move away from making those life-and-death decisions about who gets to continue to cohabitate with you.

Grissell first examines the somewhat secret lives of insects. He follows this with concepts of the ecology of gardening, explaining the function of insects in the garden as well as the interactions of insects with each other and with the plants and

other animals. The last part of the book covers the gardener’s perspective and offers tips for increasing diversity in the garden, showing the incredible difference that can result from those efforts. In the chapter entitled “The Realistic Gardener,” the author says, “In our gardens, we have an overbearing desire for order, an overwhelming obsession with perfection, and an oversimplified concept of biological facts. Taken together, this combination can stop naturalistic processes dead in their tracks.” That stopped me in my tracks!

I am always looking at ways to become a ‘better gardener,’ to have a lush veggie garden that spills over with a harvest that looks beautiful and isn’t so insect damaged as to be unappetizing. This book has helped me relax and start to enjoy the process more—to see that in my quest to be healthier and grow my own food I can reconnect with the natural world in my own small plot of land here in Oakland. I hope my garden can someday be an oasis where everyone with any number of legs can prosper. Taking the time to learn about the multitudes that live here, to observe them and befriend them, both ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ moves my life in a healthier direction. ☘

Helen Krayenhoff is co-owner of Kassenhoff Growers, a local certified organic plant nursery. You can find out more at kassenhoffgrowers.com. She is also an illustrator, watercolorist, designer, and photographer. You can see her work at helenkrayenhoff.com or check out the Berkeley Horticultural Nursery website where many of her photographs and illustrations are featured. berkeleyhort.com

INSECTARY PLANTS

The flowers on these and many other plants have nectar and pollen that are accessible to beneficial insects.

Achillea Yarrow

Anethum graveolens Dill

Anthriscus cerefolium Chervil

Aster Aster

Baccharis pilularis Coyote Brush

Calendula Calendula

Ceanothus California Lilac

Chrysanthemum Chrysanthemum

Coriandrum sativum Cilantro

Cosmos Cosmos

Eriogonum Fleabane

Eriogonum Native Buckwheat

Eschscholzia californica California Poppy

Helianthus Sunflower

Heteromeles arbutifolia Toyon

Layia platyglossa Tidy Tips

Lobularia maritima Sweet Alyssum

Mimulus Monkey Flower

Nemophila menziesii Baby Blue Eyes

Prunus ilicifolia Holly-Leaved Cherry

Rosmarinus officinalis Rosemary

Rudbeckia Rudbeckia

Sambucus mexicana Elderberry

Scabiosa Pincushion Flower

Zinnia Zinnia

This list is courtesy of Our Water, Our World

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