



Ladybugs

Ladybug, Ladybeetle or Ladybird? According to folklore, insects were destroying farmers' crops in Europe during the Middle Ages. The farmers prayed to the Virgin Mary for help. Soon an insect came, ate the plant-destroying pests and saved the crops. The farmers began calling the round little red beetle "The Beetles of Our Lady," and they eventually became known as "Lady Beetles" with the red wings representing the Virgin's cloak and black spots symbolizing her joys and sorrows. In Great Britain, they are known as "Ladybirds." In fact, there are 5000 different kinds of ladybugs found worldwide with 400 of them in North America.

Adult beetles have round to oval-shaped bodies that can range in colors such as yellow, pink, orange, red and black. Some have spots and some will not. The bright coloration serves as a warning to discourage other animals that might try to eat them. When disturbed, adult ladybugs secrete a chemical that smells and tastes terrible out of their joints. This discourages birds and other predators that might want to eat them and the bright color helps predators to remember the distasteful encounter. Ladybug larva look like little black spiny alligators with bright spots, and while they look foreboding, they will not hurt plants or people. However, aphids and other soft-bodied insects better watch out! A single ladybug larva will eat dozens of aphids a day, and about 400 during its development. An adult will eat about 300 aphids before it lays eggs and more than 5000 in its lifetime.



Aphids may be the favorite menu item, but ladybugs will also feast on mealybugs, spidermites and some eggs of other insects. A female ladybug is a little larger than a male and will search out a colony of aphids and lay her eggs in its midst. She will lay a cluster of ten to fifty tiny, light yellow eggs and could lay 50-300 eggs in her lifetime. The eggs hatch in 2-5 days and the larva will feed for 2-3 weeks before they pupate. The adult emerges in 7-10 days. Ladybugs can produce 5-6 generations in a season. This reproductive capacity coupled with the ladybugs' ravenous appetite allows it to rapidly clean out its prey.

In autumn, the adults will gather in a protected area to hibernate. This may be located at the base of a tree, along a fence, under a rock, on the sunny side of a house, under a pile of leaves, anywhere where they are protected from the winter cold. These clusters of

ladybugs are called aggregations. Many of the ladybugs that are sold for natural pest control are collected in the mountains of California. In these mountains, ladybugs congregate in colonies of huge numbers in the same sites year after year. Some colonies have been known to have as many as 500 gallons of ladybugs. Each gallon contains 72,000 – 80,000 adults. Bags of ladybugs are sold to the home gardener as a means of natural pest control. Aphids, mealybugs, spidermites and scale can wreak havoc on trees, shrubs, flower and vegetable gardens and all are on the ladybugs' menu. Releasing the ladybugs in the evening after watering down the area will encourage them to stay in your yard. If prey is plentiful, they will stay. However, if there is not a food source, they will fly to other areas. Ladybug, Ladybug, fly away home. Before grabbing an insecticide, just remember that you may have friendly bugs helping you out in your garden.

Questions or comments? Contact Jim Gainan via email jim@gainans.com.