

Ladybugs

One of the most recognizable of insects is the ladybug, that rotund little fire-engine red beetle that scurries around the spring garden. Also known as lady beetles and ladybird beetles, these charming insects are natural enemies to many soft-bodied pests that damage our roses and are an invaluable aid to keeping the pests in check.

Their name was coined by European farmers who prayed to the Virgin Mary when pests began eating their crops; after ladybugs showed up and wiped out the invading bad guys, the farmers named them "beetle of Our Lady " which was eventually shortened to "lady beetle" and "ladybug."

Depending on the species, ladybugs can have spots, stripes, or no markings at all, and an array of colors including reds, yellows, orange, gray, black, brown and even pink. One of the most common, the seven-spotted ladybug, is red or orange with three spots on each side and one in the middle, and a black head with white patches on either side. They're brilliant coloring is a warning to predators; when threatened, they secrete an oily, foul-tasting fluid from joints in their legs. Birds are ladybugs' main predators, but they also fall victim to frogs, wasps, spiders, and dragonflies.

Ladybugs lay their eggs in clusters or rows on the underside of a leaf, usually where aphids have gathered. Larvae emerge in a few days and resemble baby alligators. They grow quickly and shed their skin several times. When they reach full size, they attach to a leaf by their tail, and a pupa is formed. Within a week or two, the pupa becomes an adult ladybug.

Both the adult and larvae are voracious eaters and a single lady beetle may eat 5,000 aphids in its lifetime. They have broad tastes depending on the type, and aphids, scales, spider mites and mealybugs are favorites. Adults may also feed on pollen and nectar.

Active from spring until fall, they hibernate when the weather turns cold, seeking a warm, secluded place like rotting logs, under rocks, or even inside houses. These hibernating colonies can contain thousands of ladybugs.

While you can purchase lady beetles, when released in your garden, they usually don't stick around. To keep them in place, they need food for themselves and their young, so don't eliminate all pests. Provide flowers for pollen and nectar; they like types with shallow flowers such as dill or alyssum.

Ladybugs are susceptible to many garden insecticides; it is best to not use them at all, but if needed, choose selective insecticides such as *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt), soaps, horticultural oils or materials derived from and neem oil. Check the product label for compatibility with our little rotund garden helpers.

By Nanette Londeree, Master Rosarian

