

LACEWINGS

In the late afternoon and early evening, you may find some silvery-green, flying insects wafting around your garden. These delicate creatures are Lacewings, and their presence is a very good thing, especially if you have been trying to keep an aphid population under control. The adult winged insects feed on nectar and pollen and help to pollinate your vegetables and fruits which is one reason why they are considered beneficial. They lay cylindrical eggs, one by one, that they attach on hair-like stalks to the underside of leaves (photo right). These distinctive eggs enable the gardener to easily identify them and then leave them to develop into larvae.

The Lacewings' real value to the vegetable gardener comes from their offspring, the aptly named "aphid lions." These spiky cream and brown larvae emerge from their eggs with a greedy appetite, easily guzzling down 200 aphids, mites, thrips and small caterpillars during their two to three week existence. With several pairs of legs and large biting mouthparts, these eating machines look a lot like garden bad guys, but study the photos and learn to recognize them as welcome visitors. Leave them be and let them get to work.

After chomping on garden pests for a few weeks, the larvae then spin a cocoon, and emerge as green winged adults after a mere five days. Each new female can lay more than 200 eggs so, to keep these beauties around, follow these steps.

Don't spray insecticides. Allow one very small area of your yard to become untidy. Don't cut the plants in this section of the yard during fall cleanup in order to give Lacewings a place to hibernate. They particularly love to roll themselves up in leaf litter so providing one small net bag of shredded leaves could provide refuge to the next generation of these lovely garden guardians.



Clockwise from top: Green lacewing, lacewing lava on flower bud, lacewing egg on Japanese knotweed (credit all: Jenn Forman-Orth)

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Garden Insects of North America: The Ultimate Guide to Backyard Bugs | Whitney Crenshaw

The Organic Gardener's Handbook of Natural Pest and Disease Control | Jeff Ball