Help 4-H’ers identify common garden pests

Source: Blake Newton, 4-H youth extension entomology specialist

As you and your 4-H’er continue to monitor your garden’s progress, the chances are high for running into a few uninvited and unwanted visitors. If you find damage, you and your 4-H’er can pretend to be garden investigators. Look for clues, gather the suspects and then eliminate all of them but one. Here are some helpful hints to help you get to the bottom of insect damage.

* Know your plants. Sometimes, plants suffer because they were planted in the wrong location. Plants in areas that do not receive the correct amount of sunlight and water will never thrive, and that makes them susceptible to opportunistic insect pests. Usually only a handful of insects attack each type of common garden plant. Knowing the common pests for your crops will help you quickly narrow down your list of suspects. It is important to note that insects are not responsible for all garden problems. Diseases, slug damage and wildlife damage can sometimes look like insect damage.
* Know your insect mouthparts. Insects have different mouthparts, and their damage can help you determine the culprit. Many insects have chewing mouthparts that eat away chunks. Common garden pests with chewing mouthparts are beetles, caterpillars and grasshoppers. Other insects have piercing tubes that suck out plant juices and do not remove parts of the plant. Their damage causes wilted or discolored areas. These insect pests include aphids, stink bugs, whiteflies and squash bugs.
* Know your beneficial insects. Just because you see an insect in the garden does not mean it is going to cause damage. Some insects prey on the pests. For example, ladybugs and green lacewings (both larvae and adults) feed on aphids. Virtually every wasp found in a garden is a beneficial predator. All spiders and centipedes are predators too. Some insects like bees and butterflies are beneficial pollinators and help plants produce some of your young person’s favorite foods like apples, potatoes, peaches and blueberries. Flower flies—the little guys that hover in place and look like tiny bees—are important pollinators, and their larvae eat aphids.
* Check the (ENT)facts. Now that you know about your plants and observed the damage and the insects in your garden, use the University of Kentucky Department of Entomology’s ENTFacts to determine what is causing the damage. We have one on nearly every common insect pest problem in Kentucky. Find the ones about your plant and see if you can find a match. Here are some helpful links:
  + Ornamental Landscape Plants Pests: <https://entomology.ca.uky.edu/landscape>
  + Fruit Pests: <https://entomology.ca.uky.edu/fruit>
  + Vegetable Pests: <https://entomology.ca.uky.edu/vegetable>

If you have trouble determining the source of crop damage, remember the UK Cooperative Extension Service is here to help. We have extension agents in every county who can help you find solutions to common garden problems.

If your young person really enjoys looking for insects and learning more about them, consider having them complete a 4-H entomology project. More information on 4-H entomology opportunities is available at the (COUNTY NAME) office of the UK Cooperative Extension Service.

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