



*Butterflies, bees, lady beetles and praying mantis all have an important role in health gardens*

## IT'S A BUG-EAT-BUG WORLD!

**By Angela Chandler**

**The Garden Academy**

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Organic gardeners often speak about beneficial insects. They are one of our front-line, chemical-free defenses against pest species. But how do we get the army of pollinators, predators, and parasitoids to choose our gardens as their home and hunting ground?

By creating a garden insectary - a specific habitat that provides food, water, shelter, and a place to breed new generations. These habitats are common in nature, where indigenous insects evolved with indigenous plants. But they are not so common in the average home garden where the balance of nature has been greatly altered.

Botanical gardens and organic farms build wide insectary beds that can be hundreds of feet long. The average home landscape does not have that much room, but we can still reap the benefits of beneficials by creating "pocket" insectaries - smaller habitats that include all of the amenities required to attract beneficials and keep them in your garden.



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Pocket insectaries can be any size. You could plan an insectary as a central feature of your garden. A well planned insectary can be quite pretty. You can locate smaller pockets in multiple locations in your landscape so beneficials will be in close proximity to pests. With a little creativity, you can even create a pocket insectary in a container and move it anywhere you see a pest problem arising.

There are many plants you can use in an insectary. In fact, diversity of resources is one of the keys to attracting the largest possible population of predators. Predatory insects will feed on pest insects, but some of them also use pollen and nectar in all or part of their life cycle.

Use native blooming plants liberally. Members of the carrot family such as Queen Anne's Lace, dill, parsley, fennel and cilantro attract many beneficials. The flowers of radish, cabbage, mustard and kale are popular among predators. Herbs of all kinds are favored by beneficials. You can even let a few weeds have their way in the insectary - dandelions are dandy and will hardly be noticed in your mass of flowers.

Your job is to provide a safe and supportive habitat. There should be a water source nearby. Mulch will provide hiding places and a cool place to rest. And of course, you should never use pesticides in or near the insectary. In return for the free room and board, the beneficials will pollinate flowers that result in fruits, vegetables, and seeds and prey on pest species that cause damage to desirable plants. Some beneficial insects do both!

Garden insectaries are fascinating places for the whole family, too. It's fun to get to know the many insects that are part of the natural defense system. We are all familiar with butterflies, bees, lady beetles and praying mantis, but many of these amazing insects are not well known to homeowners. Some predatory insects are very small. Several species can barely be seen. But don't let their size fool you - if they were any bigger, it might get scary for us! After seeing a Praying Mantis hunt, I have always been thankful they didn't grow six feet tall!