

Aphids: Amazons of the Insect World

By Sue Hakala

Aphids are the Amazons of the insect world. The virgin females give birth to about seven live young a day all summer long. In autumn males are born without mouths solely to service the females, sort of like the ultimate Stepford male. Eggs laid at this time that will over winter to emerge in the spring.

Hungry these drill-mouthed little beings are. They aren't particularly picky, happy to suck up thousands of plant species' proteins and sugars. Aphids are defenseless against predation, and enlist ants as their security guards. If you see ants running up and down your plants, suspect mealy bugs and take a good look at the base of the plant, in the soil and on the undersides of leaves. The ants stroke the backs of their small friends encouraging them to excrete a drop of honeydew from their teeny, tiny butts. Honeydew, mostly made up of water, contains nutrients: amino acids (the building blocks of proteins) and sugars. In delighted return, the ants keep them safe from parasites and predators. When need be, ants will sometimes even build little shelters over them. Herded together by the ants as a dairyman does his cows, the aphids thrive.

Unfortunately, your plants won't. The best defense is to strike when the aphid population is small. Check your plants carefully for natural enemies of aphids such as green lacewings, aphid predator midges, lady beetles (ladybugs), and parasitic wasps. If present, these predators will keep the population in check with no action on your part needed. If not, then blast the aphids off with a hose every 2-3 days, and get under the leaves. Once blasted off, they can't find their way back on. Some people swear by insecticidal soaps, others by spraying on water with a few drops of dishwashing soap in it. Systemics work too. Check with your nursery for the best one to use on your plant as different ones work on different aphids.