

Pest or guest?

Living with thrips and springtails

When slugs devour new-grown lettuces and gobble the shoots of favourite delphiniums your best wildlife-friendly instincts can be seriously challenged. Drastic action against the villainous mollusc may seem the only answer, but first step back and think about your garden in its entirety.

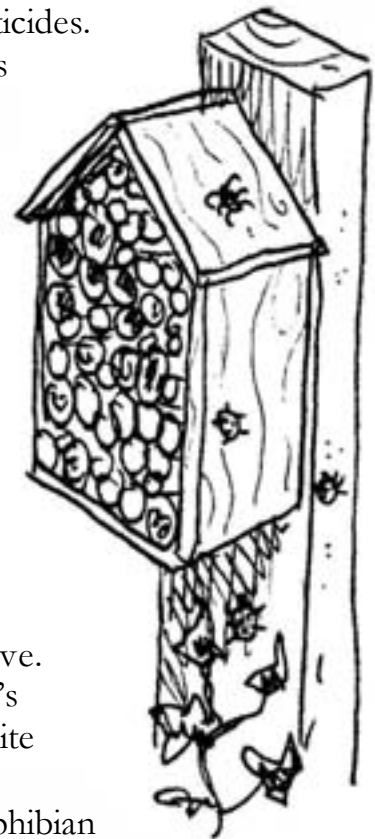
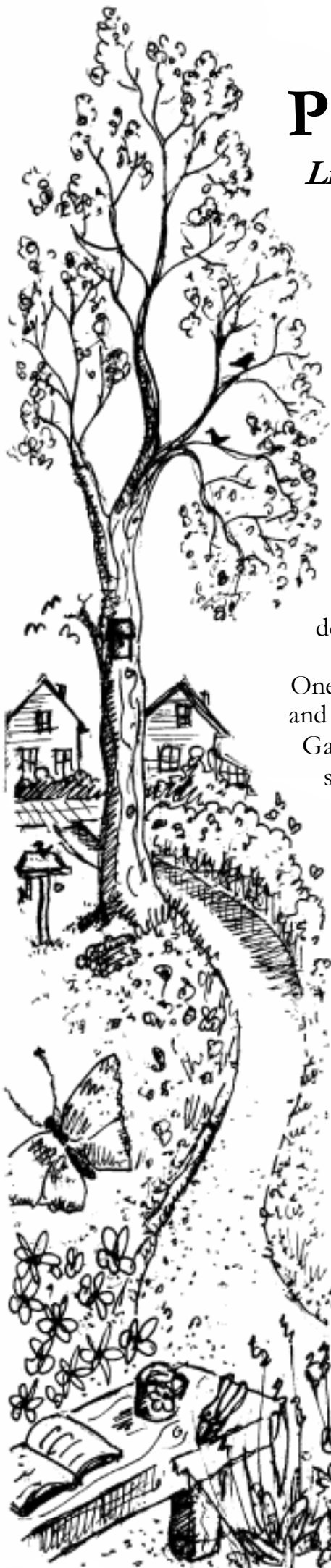
Any rash action taken by the gardener may affect the balance between creatures that devour your plants and those that feast on the devourers. Sceptics may be wary of a 'live and let live' attitude, but it really does reap rewards. Spraying with chemicals ultimately does more damage than good, creating an imbalance where creatures we regard as beneficial (because they prey on insects we regard as destructive) starve because their food source is diminished.

One of the main causes of decline in farmland birds and butterflies is widespread use of pesticides.

Gardens, where intensive production is seldom the aim, are marvellous refuges for many kinds of wildlife, survey after survey shows that most garden birds are holding their own, in some cases populations are actually increasing. A little *laissez-faire* really is a good thing.

The best thing to do is to grow as wide a range of plants as possible and so attract both beneficial predators and the undesirable pests on which they live. Creatures regarded as a gardener's enemy are very often the favourite food of some of that same gardener's best insect, amphibian or mammal friends.

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Hoverflies

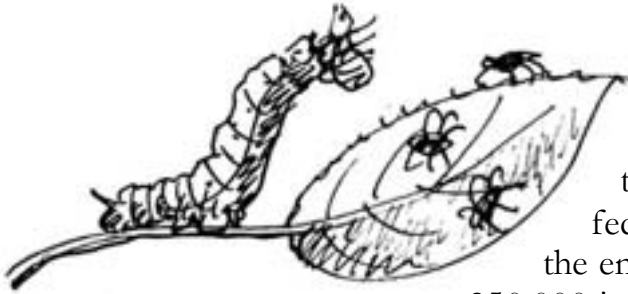
The adult hoverfly with its black and yellow stripes mimics the wasp but is completely harmless and its maggot-like larvae munch aphids by the dozen before taking to the wing.

Plants to attract beneficial insects

Grow yarrow, tansy, poached egg plant, marigolds, cosmos, hawthorn, ivy, fennel, borage, chamomile, sunflowers, goldenrod, lavender, sedum spectabile, phacelia tanacetifolia, carrot (flowers) and candytuft to attract hoverflies, bees, lacewings and ladybirds.

Ladybirds and lacewings

Everyone loves a ladybird - except the insects they prey on. Both adults and larvae feed on some of the gardener's most disliked insects - aphids, thrips, mealy bugs and mites. Some of them even eat powdery mildew fungal spores. Lacewings are the gardener's friend too; they devour aphids, mites, leafhoppers and scale insects.



Wasps

The social wasp is the one you might be tempted to swat as it buzzes around your picnic. But think twice before you strike! The grubs of the wasp are fed almost entirely on caterpillars and other insects. By the end of the summer a nest may have consumed up to 250,000 insects. So trap those pesky wasps under a glass and let them free when you've finished eating. Solitary wasps also feed their young on flies and aphids so should get a friendly welcome in your garden.

Somewhere to hibernate

The best single thing you can do to give these useful insects a chance of survival into next year is to be relaxed about tidying up. Chopping down old flower stalks and sweeping away leaves from under hedges leaves wildlife out in the cold and shivering. Make a ladybird house or a lacewing hotel by cutting up old stalks of umbellifers such as angelica, teasel or fennel and stacking them in an open-fronted box (*see illustration overleaf*) fixed to a post or tree.

Log piles provide valuable hibernating places for frogs, toads, shrews, hedgehogs, ground beetles, centipedes and rove beetles. Think how many slugs a frog can slurp down in a night, how many veg-destroying mites a big black beetle can eat. Site the log pile in a shady area in a corner of the garden or near a hedge, so wild creatures can make their getaway in spring without being spotted by hungry predators.



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