

# Homeowner's GUIDE

## Alternative Pest Management for the Lawn and Garden

XCM-221

A pest-free lawn and garden may sound ideal, but is it really? Maintaining the perfect urban landscape often results in a reliance on pesticides that can lead to environmental and human health problems.

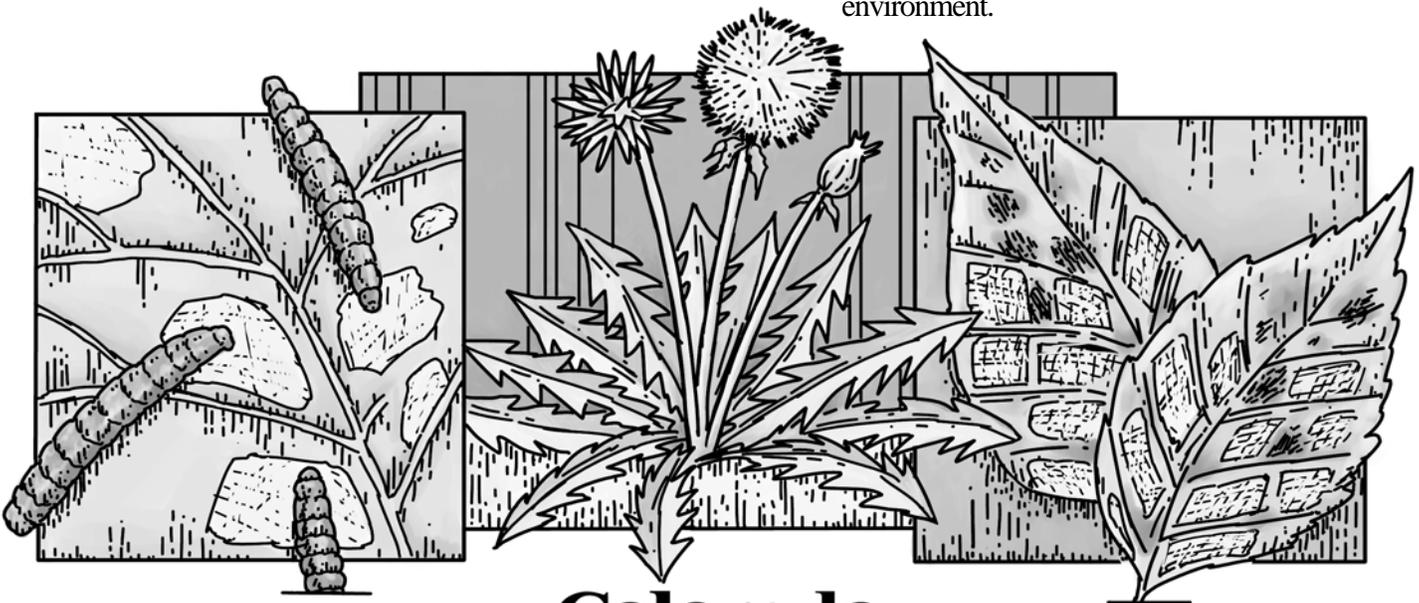
Many homeowners are turning to pesticide alternatives as they re-evaluate the consequences of their not-so-ideal landscaping.

Fortunately, there are many biological processes that work to keep pests in a natural balance. The 'ideal' garden is one with vigorous plants and protected natural enemies of certain annoying pests. The conventional approach—of applying pesticides routinely, or at the first sign of any pest—is replaced with a lower input emphasis on nature at its best.

An alternative approach is not the answer to all problems every time. But when it works, it is an ideal way to address pest problems while helping protect our water supplies.

The principles of this alternative approach include:

- Learning more about plants and their pests.
- Selecting landscape and garden plant varieties that are resistant to pests.
- Rotating annual garden plants to reduce the buildup of pests.
- Inspecting plants frequently for the presence both of pests and beneficial organisms.
- Determining if control measures are really necessary before taking action.
- Selecting methods that are least disruptive to natural controls and least hazardous to the environment.



**Colorado  
State**  
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As you experiment with pesticide alternatives, it's a good idea to keep a record of your observations and the results of your treatments for future reference.

## Cultural Pest Control Methods

Cultural pest control methods seek to create the optimum growing conditions for plants, natural predators, and unfavorable conditions for pests.

Some things to consider when managing a garden:

- Select well-adapted, disease resistant plant varieties.
- Choose the right plants for the location and soil conditions.
- Buy healthy and pest-free transplants.
- Avoid under- or over-watering, since both make plants vulnerable to insects and disease.
- Improve the soil by adding organic amendments. A soil analysis is the best way to evaluate soil type and fertility.
- Change the location of annual plants from year to year to disrupt the life cycle of pests.
- Remove infested plant residue from your garden in the fall, so that pests do not over-winter there.

- Incorporate a wide variety of plants to disperse potential pest problems and to provide diverse habitat for beneficial insects.
- Keep your vegetable garden clean of rocks, wood and debris that provide hiding places for slugs or damaging insects.

Some things to consider when managing a lawn:

- Plant hardy strains of turf-type tall fescue, blue grama, wheatgrass, or buffalograss instead of high maintenance Kentucky blue grass.
- Maintain a healthy lawn with good watering practices: water as needed, and turn off automatic sprinkler systems after a rain or during cool cloudy weather.
- Fertilize your lawn only as needed to promote a vigorously growing turf that will compete well with weeds. A soil test is one way to know what nutrients your lawn needs.
- Maintain a mowing height no less than 2 ½ to 3 inches, and leave the clippings on the lawn so that their nutrients are recycled.
- Core aerate the lawn once or twice a year.
- Use groundcovers, mulch, or beds instead of grass in difficult areas such as sloped ground or shady spots.



Xeriscape design photo by Grant Reid.

## Mechanical Pest Control Methods

Mechanical pest management options rely on physical methods of destroying pests and include:

- hand weeding,
- using a hoe or tiller rather than a herbicide,
- hand-picking insects off plants,
- hosing down plants to dislodge insects,
- pruning diseased or insect-infested woody plants, and
- using mulches to reduce erosion and weeds and to conserve moisture.

## Biological Pest Control Methods

Beneficial organisms such as certain insects or fungi can help control pests when broad spectrum pesticides are avoided. These organisms may occur naturally or may be purposely introduced.

The main categories of these “beneficials” include:

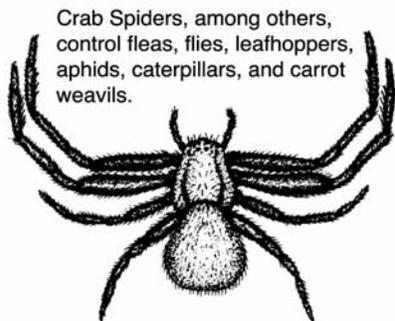
*Predators* – such as lady beetles, spiders, green lacewings, syrphid flies, damsel bugs, minute pirate bugs, ground beetles, and predatory mites. Larger animals such as birds, frogs, and garden snakes also prey on pest insects.

*Parasites* – like the tachinid fly and braconid wasp lay eggs on or inside insect pests.

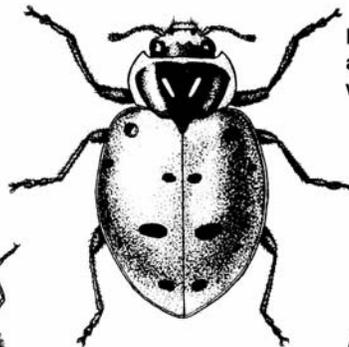
*Pathogens* – such as fungi, bacteria, and viruses that infect pests much in the same way they infect people or other animals.

Some garden stores and catalogs carry beneficials such as lady beetles. Conserving beneficials already in your garden is probably more cost-effective, and frequently is more successful. Pesticides often kill these natural garden friends.

### Beneficial Insects and the Pests They Control

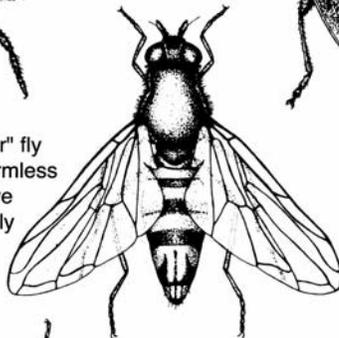


Crab Spiders, among others, control fleas, flies, leafhoppers, aphids, caterpillars, and carrot weavils.

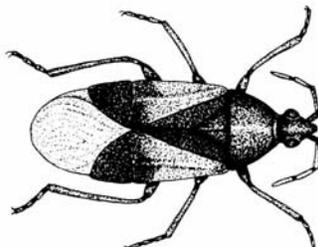
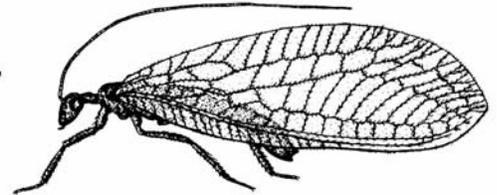


Lady Beetles, or "Ladybugs", control aphids, aphid nymphs, rootworms, spider mites, and weavils.

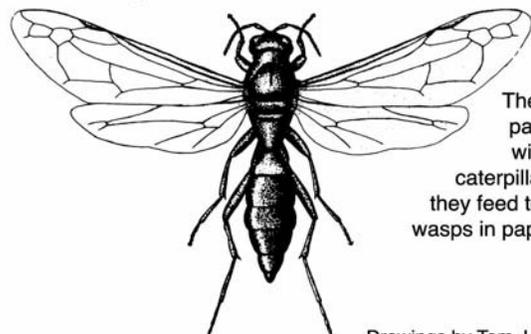
The Flower fly or "Hover" fly (Syrphidae family) is harmless to humans but is effective against aphids, especially early in the season.



Green lacewings, especially the larvae, are voracious consumers of aphids, caterpillars, beetles, and white flies.



Minute pirate bugs are tiny (less than 1/8 inch) but feed on thrips, spider mites, and insect eggs.



The Polistes paper wasp will hunt for caterpillars which they feed to immature wasps in paper nests.

Drawings by Tom J. Weissling

To encourage beneficials in your yard:

- plant a diverse landscape that provides a variety of habitats and food sources,
- learn to distinguish beneficial insects from pests, and
- minimize pesticide applications.

These natural controls often work more slowly than pesticides and they require a food supply that could be the very pest you'd prefer to be gone. However, they are nature's way of handling high populations of pests, they don't contaminate our water supplies, and they can lend beauty to a garden.

## Chemical Pest Control Methods

There are some naturally occurring chemicals that are classified as pesticides but nevertheless can be used in the context of "organic gardening." In general, these compounds tend to be less harmful to beneficial insects and they often break down more rapidly than synthetic pesticides.

Information on alternative pest management techniques is available at your local Cooperative Extension office. The local Master Gardener program can also help you determine how to properly care for your yard and landscape.

Among the less toxic chemical controls are microbial insecticides, botanical pesticides, mineral-based pesticides, and synthetic organic compounds (oils, soaps and detergents) produced from petroleum distillates.

They are available in some garden stores, but may have to be requested specifically. Some of these products are listed in Table 1.

Please note that these products are still classified as pesticides and should not be used indiscriminately. They are best incorporated into a management program that uses all available cultural, mechanical, and biological control methods.

Finally, it is a mistake to assume that naturally occurring chemicals are non-toxic. Some of these are more toxic to humans than synthetic pesticides. As with all chemicals, always read the label instructions prior to using these alternatives. Under certain conditions, some of these chemicals can cause injury to plants and animals.

### What to Plant to Attract Beneficial Insects

- Herbs belonging to the **mint family**: lemon balm, pennyroyal, thyme, spearmint.
- Plants belonging to the **carrot family**: dill and parsley.
- Vegetables belonging to the **cabbage family**: radishes, mustard and broccoli (if allowed to flower).
- Queen Anne's lace, also known as wild carrot (will serve as a nectar plant for parasitic wasps).
- Aster, Asclepias (butterfly plant), cosmos, beebalm (monarda), Russian sage, Cleome, and purple cornflower attract butterflies and bees.

**Table 1. Alternative Pesticides for Lawn and Garden Use.**

<b>Alternative Control</b>	<b>Controls</b>	<b>Notes</b>
<b>Microbial insecticides</b>		
Bacillus thuringiensis (BT, Dipel)	Caterpillars	Non-toxic to mammals
Avermectin-B (Avid)	Mites, leafminers, psyllids	
<b>Botanical pesticides</b>		
Sabadilla (Red devil)	Leafhopper, caterpillars, squash bugs, et al.	Low toxicity, fast knock down, short residual, may irritate
Pyrethrum (Pyrenone)	Most insects	Low toxicity to mammals fast “knock down”
Neem (Margosan-O)	Leafminers, loopers, mealy bugs, thrips, whitefly, etc. some fungicidal activity	Slow kill, growth regulator
<b>Mineral-based pesticides</b>		
Sulfur	Fungicidal activity on powdery mildew, rust, some blights, insecticidal activity on psyllids, mites, thrips	Plant injury possible, especially at high temperatures
Lime sulfur	Dormant spray for diseases such as blight, anthracose, powdery mildew	Bad smelling, may irritate
Bordeaux mixture	Acts as a fungicide, controls bacterial leaf spot, repels many insects	Some cannot be used on certified “organic” produce
<b>Synthetic organic compounds</b>		
Insecticidal soap (Safer’s soap)	Aphids, certain scales, mealy bugs, psyllids, mites, thrips, white fly	Non-toxic to mammals, plant injury possible
Dormant oils	Aphids, mites and certain scales that over-winter on woody plants	Non-toxic to mammals, plant injury possible
Summer oils	Aphids, mites, scales, thrips and their eggs	Plant injury possible

*\*For more information, see Colorado State University Cooperative Extension Fact Sheets 2.945, Friendly Pesticides for the Home and Garden; 5.569, Insect Oils: Horticultural Oils; and 5.547, Insect Control: Soaps and Detergents.*

## Alternative Pest Management Methods

### Insects

- Keep your garden free of infested plant residue and other debris.
- Prune out insect-infested parts of plants. Hand pick bugs off garden plants.
- Encourage biological controls by planting flowers that provide nectar, pollen, and habitat for friendly predators and parasites.
- Avoid broad spectrum insecticides.
- Use insecticidal soaps, oils, and botanicals as appropriate.
- Dislodge unwanted insects from woody plants using a stream of water.

### Slugs

- Put beer in shallow containers or saucers to attract and drown slugs.
- Place an overturned clay pot near plants where slugs feed and check frequently for collected slugs.

### Weeds

- Crowd out weeds with a healthy lawn.
- Use mulches and non-plastic landscape fabric.
- Hand pull, mow, or hoe weeds.
- Accept some weeds in your lawn as part of a natural landscape.

### Diseases

- Look for healthy transplants of well adapted, disease resistant varieties.
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