



### The Good Guys: Lady Bugs!

It's easy to get caught up trying to find and eradicate pests in the garden. After all, we carefully plan, build, plant, and tend our plots, all for the hope of a beautiful space with a bountiful harvest. Any aspects out of our control, like the weather and pests, can wreak havoc!

It's good to keep in mind, however, that a diverse vegetable garden is a mini ecosystem. A healthy garden harbors many kinds of life, from microorganisms that help break down dead plant matter, to bees, to toads.

And believe it or not, a healthy garden includes pests. As is the case in ecosystems, the diversity of plants and animals makes up the structure and strength of the whole. The more types of pests for the beneficial insects to eat, the more types and numbers of beneficial insects will thrive.

Pests can get out of hand – especially if plants are stressed for one reason or another. But if the garden holds a rich mix of plant types, chances are good that a legion of beneficial insects won't be far behind.

In the case of a pest explosion, we recommend watching the population for a week or two and waiting to spray any (even organic) pest control unless you see no increase in beneficial populations. Observing the balance between pests and beneficial insects can be fascinating, and heartily encouraging. Especially when the beneficials knock back the pests! It's a great feeling to realize you don't need to spend money on a control method or take time to spray your plants!

A few weeks ago at our production site at the Frick Art & Historic Center in Point Breeze, we noticed lady bugs covering the asparagus fronds (the ferny portion of the plant that feeds the roots). On closer inspection, we found the pests: tiny grey-green aphids lining the tips of the plants. We wouldn't have noticed the aphids without the lady bugs, and the plants would have suffered or possibly died from the aphid damage. With further research, we found out that lady bugs also eat asparagus beetle larvae, as well as mealybugs, spider mites, whiteflies, and a host of other pests.

Hundreds of species of lady bugs live in America, some of them native and some introduced. They are joined by their common love of aphids, and can eat up to 40 an hour! Keep an eye out for lady bugs in their various life stages. The larval stage is very distinctive, as it looks like a miniature, menacing, black and orange alligator!

Lady bugs are available commercially, but they tend to fly away when introduced. To encourage lady bugs and other beneficial insects in your garden, try these steps:

1. Plant a diversity of crops, including flowers and flowering herbs.

2. Avoid pesticide use.
3. Include a water feature in your garden. A bird bath, fountain, or a simple dish of water encourages beneficial insects to stay.