Plant Lovers’ Almanac

Kids can get summertime bug education in backyard

Whole world of adventure waits; grab a magnifying glass and go

By Danae Wolfe
Special to the Beacon Journal

If you’re looking for ways to get your youngsters interested in the outdoors this season, look no further than your own backyard.

While it may seem like an ordinary place, your garden is bustling with alien creatures just waiting to be discovered. From eight-legged monsters covered in fur to critters that can jump up to 150 times their body length, life in the undergrowth is anything but dull. The alien creatures I’m referring to are, of course, insects and spiders.

Before you think “ew,” hear me out. Imagine taking your kids to a place where sword fighting is an everyday occurrence or where perfectly choreographed dances are performed for hours. Imagine the excitement in their eyes when they witness aerial battles between fearless fliers.

It may sound like I’m talking about packing up the family and sweeping them off to some exotic vacation locale, but the performances

Jumping spiders have crazy hairstyles and like to dance.
I just mentioned are happening in your own backyard.

Ambush and assassin bugs stab their prey with their sword-like mouth parts and drink the juices of their victims like a can of soda. These predatory beneficial insects will help keep plant pests at bay in your garden this season.

Jumping spiders have crazy hair styles in a variety of colors and perform elaborate dances to attract potential mates. Big and small, these arachnids are sure to entertain your kids in the garden.

If you're lucky enough to live near a wetland or pond, you'll likely see dragonflies performing daring aerial acts. These prehistoric-looking creatures will pluck prey right out of the air.

Not convinced? Keep in mind that many insects provide valuable ecosystem services in the landscape including pollination, aeration of soil, providing food sources for other wildlife (any birders out there?) and pest management. In fact, research shows that insects provide up to $57 billion in services every year. While they may seem pesky, insects are actually great.

**Bug-watching tips**

To get your kiddos excited about bugs, give them a magnifying lens, or better yet, a camera. Try popping the lens out of a disposable camera and holding it in front of your camera phone lens to get up-close shots. You can also use a magnifying lens or an eye loupe.

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It's important to be patient and get low to the ground! Many insects and spiders hang out in vegetation and on flowers. Look closely and move slowly to avoid scaring insects.

While bees and wasps are not generally aggressive, it's important to keep your distance (especially if you or your children are allergic to stings). I make a habit of getting up close and personal with all kinds of stinging insects and I've never once been stung, but it's important to gauge the insect's aggression before getting too close.

Always practice environmental stewardship when in nature. Encouraging your kids to appreciate and conserve these delicate life forms will foster a sense of appreciation for all life.

Use pesticides sparingly and responsibly. Practice integrated pest management and before grabbing the spray, be sure to properly identify the culprit (you may be killing a beneficial insect!).

Finally, if you'd like help with identifying the creepy crawlers in your landscape, stop by your local Extension office. The Summit County Master Gardeners are available 9 a.m. to noon Tuesdays to answer your horticulture questions. And of course as a self-professed bug lady, I am more than willing to help.

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