

Digging Deep with Cynthia Brian

The intriguing life of ladybugs

By Cynthia Brian

"Ladybug, ladybug, fly away home. Your house is on fire and your children will burn." – Nursery Rhyme



Barley and weeds infested with aphids are a habitat for lady beetles.

Photos Cynthia Brian

If you were like me, when you were a child, this ladybug nursery rhyme was one of your favorites. I could imagine the tiny red beetle with the black dots on her back swooping in like a great eagle to rescue her babies. As an adult, of course, I know better than to wish for the ladybugs to fly away home. I want them to make my garden their home to keep the aphids away.

Every year around this time you'll find containers of ladybugs for sale at garden centers. Often when you get these ladybirds home (yes, they are also known as ladybirds or ladybug beetles) they disappear as soon as you open the carton, leaving you wondering where they went and why. The answer is simple. Ladybugs only stay in a habitat that provides food and their main cuisine is aphids. If your garden doesn't have aphids, you may rejoice that these red angels have flown to liberate another's garden. In one year, a single ladybird will eat 5,000 aphids or more.

A most exciting experience transpired in my daughter's garden and I was fortunate to witness the metamorphosis. As Heather prepared her yard for a party she began to cut a field of wild barley and weeds when she noticed many numerous living things. She crouched down on her knees for a closer look to see a plethora of bugs in a vari-

ety of stages including ladybugs. That's when she called me. She didn't want to disturb the life cycle of what she ascertained were breeding ladybugs.

My first question to her was "where are the aphids" to which she answered that she hadn't seen any. I went to the field and from where I stood, I couldn't see anything either, but as soon as I knelt down for an up close and personal look, I was mesmerized. I had never observed ladybugs in their egg, larvae, pupa, or youngster forms. Various stems were hatching at different times. Yellow eggs hung next to larvae that resembled a caterpillar alligator. Then the next stage of pupa was orange with black dots. Juveniles were an orange-yellow without black spots. Adults could be seen on the same stem. The field was alive with birthing ladybugs.

Nearby oleanders were cloaked with aphids as were many of the weeds. The four-stage life cycle of the ladybug begins with the female laying a dozen to 50 eggs after mating onto a plant that will be rich with food. Although we call them ladybugs, there are both female and male ladybeetles. In one season a female may produce 1,000 or more eggs, some of which will become a meal for the larvae. The black and spotted larvae emerge from the eggs in only about four days feeding voraciously on aphids, in-

sect eggs, mites, and other bugs. Resembling alligator like caterpillars, they'll eat 400 or more aphids before they pupate in the next two to three weeks. The pupal stage lasts for three to 12 days when the adult beetles metamorphic into the ladybugs that we recognize.

The adults will stay in a garden as long as aphids or other insects they munch on prevail. When temperatures drop below 55 degrees, ladybugs will hibernate for up to nine months to survive the cold. Once the weather warms, these dynamos begin their feeding frenzy once again until their lifespan of about one year reaches its limits.

If you have lots of aphids in your garden, you have a prime habitat for ladybugs. Get up close, look under leaves, and watch the fascinating cycle of one of our favorite garden friends. Don't fret when the ladybeetles fly away home because it usually means that your landscaping is now aphid free.

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Ladybug larva resembles an alligator caterpillar on barley.