

Bethel College Mennonite Church Creation Care Committee
Creation Stewardship Notes # 4 – August, 2003
Making Friends

Anyone who cares for a yard and garden has probably learned to see all those tiny creatures that invade her garden as hostile. I am no different. For me the only good two-spotted spider mite or squash bug is a dead one. Still, I have learned that a knee jerk reaction to all creepy-crawlies is a mistake. Even though most of us have learned to see lady bugs and praying mantids as friends, we probably retain a hostile attitude toward such tribes as snakes, wasps, and spiders. A more discriminating attitude toward these folks is well advised. A good start can be made by taking a closer look at the following denizens of your garden.

Cicada Killer (*Sphecius speciosus*): The Cicada Killer (female) is a huge wasp with a large black and yellow striped abdomen. She is quite curious and often will buzz around your head as if to say, “Who are you?” “What are you doing here?” Most people take this behavior to be hostile, but in fact the Cicada Killer almost never attacks humans. She will sting if you try to corner or catch her but even then her sting is not particularly painful.

You are most likely to become aware of the Cicada Killer when you notice a fairly large mound of dirt around a quarter-sized hole usually under the edge of a vine in your vegetable garden where the dirt is moist. (When I first gardened in Kansas I thought I had moles in my garden and stuffed mole bait in the Cicada Killer holes!) If you sit around this hole long enough you will be rewarded with a loud buzz as the Cicada Killer comes in under emergency power with a huge load. The load is a Cicada that she has captured and paralyzed. She drags the Cicada into one of her nursery chambers, lays an egg on it, and is off for another hunt. If you are particularly lucky you will come across a Cicada Killer on the lawn with a newly captured Cicada. She will be making for the nearest tree at desperate speed. She is not powerful enough to take off with the huge Cicada, so she needs to get to a tree or post that she can climb and then take off from a height.

The Cicada Killer is a beautiful animal that is endlessly interesting. She does no harm, on the contrary she does useful work. If she is your guest, take some time to make her acquaintance.

Garter Snake (*Thamnophis sirtalis*): If you meet a snake in your yard or garden it is most likely to be a Garter Snake. Most of us, myself included, are always startled when we meet a snake. I think this is because we almost never see them in advance and they tend to move only when we are quite close. I also think this “startle reflex” is a big part of our knee jerk dislike of these animals. Despite this initial heart stopping experience, it is well worth our while to calm down and take a second look. The Garter Snake is certainly an interesting animal and almost always quite beautiful. Usually around 24" long, with narrow yellow stripes down the middle of the back and along the lower sides (from which this snake gets its name). On the sides between the stripes is a broad area of red and black spots.

The Garter Snake is active in the daytime. Its diet consists largely of small animals. It is quite harmless. It will attempt to bite if it feels threatened, but is not aggressive and has a rather feeble bite. I love to have them in my garden, they add a whole lot of fun and interest and are not harmful in any way. Unfortunately, it is almost impossible for them to remain long in the urban setting since almost everyone gets out the hoe as soon as they see one. I used to have

them in my yard regularly but as we have become surrounded by development, they have become extremely rare. What a pity.

After you have made friends with the Garter Snake you might be open to a more friendly approach to the whole snake tribe. There is only one species of poisonous snake in this area and it is not likely to show up in your yard or garden.

Garden Spider (*Argiope aurantia*): This is one of the largest most spectacular spiders you are likely to see. The female's body is up to 1 1/8 inches long not counting the extended legs. When she sits in her web she looks like a four-legged spider because she places the two front legs and the two back legs together on each side. The male is only 1/4 her size, inconspicuous, and likely to be eaten after doing his thing. She has an egg-shaped abdomen that is conspicuously marked with yellow on black. She makes a spiral web with a dense zig-zag of heavier silk down the middle. This dense silk reflects ultraviolet light. Many insects see ultraviolet as a separate color and many flowers have ultraviolet patterns. Biologists have theorized that this ultraviolet pattern in an otherwise difficult to see web may attract insects to the web.

These gorgeous animals are quite common. You are fairly likely to find one in your yard or garden. If you do find one consider yourself lucky and check her out daily. If you find her when she is fairly "new", you may be lucky enough to see when the male visits her web and you can watch her slim abdomen enlarge visibly as she generates her eggs. Toward late fall you should begin to hunt for her egg sack. It is almost as large as a shooter marble and will be hung in a plant or bush someplace close to the web. After the eggs are safe she will disappear; as far as I know it is not known where she goes.

The Garden Spider is a veritable grasshopper eating machine. Just what you want in your garden. If you protect her you can always hope there will be several of her progeny the next year.

(Written by Marion Deckert)