When the Garden Wakes Up, So Do the Insects: A Spring Story About Pests, Predators, and Paying Attention

On a warm spring morning in Southwest Florida, the garden doesn't just grow—it hums.

If you pause long enough, you'll notice it. A leaf that wasn't chewed yesterday now carries a series of holes caused by **cabbageworm**. Ants move steadily up and down a broccoli stem, protecting a herd of hungry **aphids** clustered beneath a tender new leaf. The aphids pierce and suck, producing a sugar-rich honeydew eagerly collected by the ants. Nearby, newly emerged kale seedlings lie collapsed at the soil line, recently taken down by **cutworm caterpillars** feeding just below the surface.

Cabbageworm larvae on underside of kale.

Aphids feeding along the stem and newly emerged leaves of a plant.

Mealybugs on the underside of a newly emerged coontie frond.

Spring is not just a season of blooms. It's a season of relationships.

And in the Florida home landscape, those relationships are often misunderstood.

We tend to notice insects only when they become a problem. But what if those first signs, those tiny chew marks, those clusters of soft-bodied insects, are invitations? Opportunities to observe, to understand, and to respond using science-based strategies that work *with* nature instead of against it.

This is where **Integrated Pest Management (IPM)** begins.

The First Signs: What You're Likely Seeing Right Now

In Sarasota County and across Southwest Florida, spring brings a predictable wave of insect activity. As temperatures rise and plants push new, tender growth, certain pests arrive right on cue.

You may be seeing:

- **Aphids** clustering on new shoots of milkweed, roses, or vegetables
- **Whiteflies** fluttering up in clouds when disturbed

- **Spider mites** creating fine webbing on stressed plants
- **Caterpillars** feeding on herbs, ornamentals, and natives
- **Scale insects** attaching along stems of shrubs like podocarpus or ficus
- **Chinch bugs** becoming active in St. Augustine grass lawns

At first glance, these insects can feel like invaders. But in reality, they are part of a seasonal cycle—one that is often amplified by plant stress, landscape design, and timing.

A Closer Look: Why Spring Pests Show Up

Spring pests are not random. They are responding to conditions.

New plant growth is soft, nutrient-rich, and easy to feed on. This makes it especially attractive to insects like aphids and caterpillars. At the same time, environmental stress, such as drought, cold damage from winter, or inconsistent watering can weaken plant defenses.

This is a key principle we emphasize in Extension:

Healthy plants are more resilient plants.

When plants are stressed, they produce signals that can attract pests or changes to their anatomy and physiology, making them easier to exploit. That’s why pest management doesn’t start with the pest, it starts with the plant.

Before You Spray: The IPM Mindset

Integrated Pest Management is not focused on eliminating insects. It’s about making informed decisions.

Before reaching for a pesticide, ask:

- What insect am I seeing?
- Is it causing significant damage?
- Is it likely to resolve on its own?
- Are beneficial insects present?

Sometimes, doing nothing—at least initially—is the best action.

In many cases, natural predators are already on their way.

The Quiet Helpers: Beneficial Insects at Work

If you look closely at an aphid infestation, you may notice something unexpected.

A tiny, alligator-shaped larva moving slowly among them. A delicate lacewing egg perched on a slender stalk. A lady beetle adult, methodically feeding.

These are not pests.

They are predators.

Common beneficial insects in Florida landscapes include:

- **Lady beetles (ladybugs)** – both adults and larvae consume aphids
- **Green lacewings** – their larvae are voracious predators of soft-bodied insects
- **Parasitic wasps** – tiny, often unnoticed, but highly effective

Scoliid wasps, a beneficial insect, hunker down for the night between the leaves of a Jamaican caper, resting up to feast on garden pests.

- **Spiders** – generalist predators that help regulate many insect populations

A healthy garden is not pest-free. It is balanced.

Simple, Effective IPM Strategies You Can Use Today

1. **Start with Physical Removal**

One of the most effective—and often overlooked—methods is also the simplest.

- Spray aphids and whiteflies off plants with a strong stream of water
- Hand-pick caterpillars and drop them into soapy water
- Prune heavily infested plant parts

This reduces pest populations immediately without harming beneficial insects.

It also slows the problem long enough for natural predators to catch up.

2. **Try Trap Cropping: Let Them Eat Something Else**

Some plants are simply more attractive to pests than others.

This can be used strategically.

Trap cropping involves planting something pests prefer *away from your main plants* to draw them away.

Colorful and edible, nasturtiums can also help deter pests from more vulnerable garden plants.

Examples for Florida landscapes:

- Incorporate marigolds and calendula to support adult foraging beneficial insects
- Plant nasturtiums to attract aphids away from vegetables
- Use sunflowers or mustard greens to draw caterpillars
- Allow a “sacrificial” milkweed plant to host aphids while protecting others

Calendulas, densely planted along a garden boarder support foraging adult beneficial insects.

Marigolds can help “trap” plant parasitic nematodes as well as support beneficial insects.

3. **Water Wisely: Stress Makes Plants Vulnerable**

In Southwest Florida, improper watering is one of the biggest contributors to pest problems.

Overwatering can lead to root diseases like **Pythium** and *Phytophthora*, weakening plants. Underwatering creates drought stress, making plants more susceptible to mites and other pests.

Under current regional restrictions, most **Sarasota County residents** are limited to **watering just one day per week**, during early morning or evening hours.

But here’s something important—and often overlooked:

Not all watering is restricted in the same way.

Low-volume, responsible watering methods—like **hand-watering, drip irrigation, and soaker hoses—are allowed any day, at any time for plants and shrubs (not lawns).**

This is not a loophole.

It's intentional—and it aligns directly with Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ principles.

Follow Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ Principle #2:

- Water at the root zone
- Adjust for **weather conditions**
- Avoid frequent shallow watering
- Use **micro-irrigation** where possible
- Checking soil moisture before watering, rather than relying on routine

These approaches do more than conserve water.

They reduce plant stress.

And when plant stress is reduced, pest pressure often follows.

4. **Right Plant, Right Place**

Many pest issues are not insect problems; they are plant placement problems.

A plant that requires shade but is planted in full sun will be stressed. A plant that needs well-drained soil but sits in a wet area will struggle.

These stressed plants become targets.

Choosing plants adapted to your site conditions reduces pest pressure naturally. To find the right plant for your yard, visit the **UF/IFAS FFL plant guide**.

5. **Feed the System, Not Just the Plant**

Excessive fertilization—especially nitrogen—can lead to rapid, lush growth that is highly attractive to pests like aphids. Rather than pushing plants with unnecessary inputs, focus on building **soil health** and supporting steady, balanced growth. To avoid applying the wrong fertilizer, or applying it at the wrong time, follow UF/IFAS recommendations and your **local fertilizer ordinances**. Balanced nutrition leads to stronger, more resilient plants.

Learning to See: Observation as a Skill

One of the most important tools in Integrated Pest Management is careful observation. Turn over a leaf. Examine the stem. Look beyond the presence of a pest to assess the overall situation, including the extent of damage and the

presence—or absence—of natural enemies. The goal is not to ignore problems, but to make informed decisions based on what you directly observe occurring in the landscape.

During a recent walk through a demonstration garden, a visitor pointed out a milkweed plant covered in aphids.

“It’s infested,” they said.

And at first glance, it appeared that way.

But as we looked more closely, additional details came into focus. Several lady beetle were actively feeding on the aphids.

In this case, immediate intervention was not necessary.

And even when action *is* needed, the solution is not always a chemical spray. Sometimes, the most effective, immediate, and cost-efficient option is also the simplest—running your fingers along the stem to physically remove the aphids. It’s quick, targeted, and avoids disrupting the beneficial insects already doing the work.

Final Thoughts: Small Actions, Big Impact

Spring will always bring insects.

Some will chew. Some will suck. Some will hide in plain sight.

But many will also help.

The goal is not to eliminate insects from the landscape. It is to create conditions where plants, pests, and predators can exist in balance.

Because in the end, a healthy garden is not defined by the absence of insects, but by a balanced system where plants, pests, and beneficial organisms interact in ways that limit damage and support plant health.

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