I was excited the other day when I noticed that lady beetles, otherwise known as ladybugs, have decided to inhabit my back porch. You see, mealybugs moved in a few days earlier and started to attack my plants. Now instead of spraying pesticides to eliminate these pests, I can trust Mother Nature and the ladybugs to take control of the situation.

There are many species of ladybugs in Florida. Most are considered to be beneficial because they eat insects that attack our landscapes and vegetable gardens. However, not all ladybugs eat plant pests, but few are pests themselves.

Ladybugs are beetles from the family coccinellidae. Worldwide, there are more than 4,500 species of ladybugs. Ninety-six of these have been found in Florida. Only a few are native. Most arrived from somewhere else and successfully established populations in Florida.

The adult ladybug and the larvae of the ladybug look nothing alike. Adults are oval with wings and range in length from 1 millimeter to 10 millimeters, depending on the species. Females are usually larger than the males. ladybugs can occur in many shades of red, orange, yellow and even black. They may or may not have spots. The larvae are generally more elongated than the adults and have a soft body. Some are colored yellow and blue.

Ladybugs are predators of many plant pests, using their mandibles to chew. Plant pests preferred by ladybugs include scale, aphids, mites, whiteflies and mealybugs.

Some species of ladybugs will primarily feed on one certain pest, not touching others. For example, nearly 80 percent of the ladybugs found in Florida feed on scale insects and only 13 percent primarily feed on aphids.

If a ladybug’s favorite feast is not available it may supplement its diet with other food. They may consume flower nectar, water, and honeydew - the sugary excretion of the piercing-sucking insects they normally prey on.

Ladybugs are great tools for control of plant pests in the garden. They regulate and control the populations of their prey, eliminating the need for pesticides. However, one has to be careful when introducing ladybugs to a landscape. Ladybugs cannot prevent pests. If pests are not present, the ladybugs will not stay in the garden.

Ladybugs are gaining in popularity as an alternative to pesticides. They are becoming more available through mail-order catalogues and the Internet. It is important, however, to know which pests ladybugs prefer so you can get optimum control.

Last week, children in a junior Master Gardener class released nearly 900 ladybugs into the landscape demonstration garden in Osceola Heritage Park during a spring-break day camp. These beneficial insects will work to keep the pest problem under control in the garden so the use of chemicals can be reduced.

For more information on ladybugs and their prey, call the Osceola County Master Gardeners at 321-697-3000. They are available to take calls from Mondays to Fridays, 10am to 2pm.

Landscape design class
A beginning landscape design class will be offered April 1, 8 and 15 in the Extension Services building at Osceola Heritage Park. Call for details.

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