

## Leave Me Alone!

Insects and other creatures can't really talk to us, but in some ways they say a lot! One such statement is by their color. This article is about warning coloration.

Certain color combinations in nature, especially in animals, warn us that the critter is inedible, poisonous or just downright nasty. Warning colors are usually combinations of black with yellow, orange, red, blue, green or white. Think of the poison arrow frogs of South America. They come in these patterns of colors and in some solid colors as well. Many insects use the combinations above to tell predators they are not to be eaten and should be left alone.

Monarch butterfly larvae feed on milkweed plants and concentrate a toxin from the plants in their bodies. They have orange, white and black stripes to warn birds and other predators that they are not good to eat! The adults are also poisonous and indicate that by their orange and black color. Another butterfly, the viceroy, is also orange and black, with markings closely resembling the monarch. It however is edible. Pretty sneaky mimicking the monarch, don't you think?

Boxelder bugs, being black with red, are also saying, "leave me alone." I'll bet you have never seen a bird eating a boxelder bug! That's why they are such a nuisance. Nobody feeds on them, so they multiply out of control.

Many spiders have warning coloration as well. Think of the black widow with the red hour-glass on the underside of its abdomen. Some jumping spiders have black bodies with a red spot on the top of the abdomen. They are not dangerous, but are trying to fool us into believing they are. Even our friend the ladybird beetle is warning that it doesn't taste good. The orange and black colors give it away! It has a toxin in some tiny glands on its body. If you pick up a ladybird and squeeze it slightly (which I try never to do), it will exude some of this foul tasting material on your fingers. You can tell just by the smell of the stuff that it is nasty tasting!

Hornets and bees exhibit these colors too. There is one wingless hornet, called the "velvet ant", that should be avoided. Velvet ants are cute little creatures that look like large ants covered with long, dense hairs all over their bodies. They kind of remind me of little stuffed toys about 1 inch long! The color gives them away, though! Their bodies are black, the hairs are orange, yellow or white. Oh, oh! Better leave them alone, they sting!

As you do your gardening this next season, look at the different color combos of the little critters around you. Are some of them telling you that they are inedible or harmful, or are they just fooling you into thinking they are?

