



Winter Musings

As the winter holidays approach and the gardening is over for the year, it gives us time to reflect on what is going on with insects right now. You know that working with, and thinking about, insects is one of my favorite things to do. So I'll share some thoughts with you.

Most of the adult insects have expired, but they have left behind eggs, pupa or cocoons of their young. Some adults will actually hibernate over the winter in secluded niches, such as under logs or rocks, in our buildings (not as pests, we hope), underneath the bark of trees, in the soil, leaf litter and many other places of protection from the elements. I especially like to watch the praying mantis females lay their eggs in a frothy mass that hardens to a tough Styrofoam-like structure that protects the susceptible ova. The egg laying process starts in early October, and female adult mantises can be seen flying about looking for a good place to form this egg mass. An occasional male mantis can be found, but only because he has escaped, well, you know, from being eaten by the female during the mating process.

Some moths lay their eggs out in the open as bands around twigs to brave the winter weather. These "egg rings", as they are called, can sometimes be seen in winter as a swollen structure on a twig. They are usually well camouflaged except for that apparent swelling. The eggs hatch in the spring, and the complete life cycle takes place before fall, when eggs are laid again.

Cocoons and pupae of butterflies and moths are everywhere, but they are always so well camouflaged that you may never see one. Swallowtail butterfly pupae look like little broken off twigs and are attached to a branch in a manner that suggests that condition. Moth cocoons are covered with a grayish silk that sometimes has hairs from the caterpillar woven in. Some caterpillars actually chew up wood and incorporate that into the cocoon, making it very strong and impervious.

Beneficial ground beetles normally hibernate under rocks or wood. In spring they become active again and go after those garden pests we hate so much.

Some butterflies, like the orange and black angle wings, hibernate under loose bark of trees and sometimes, on a warm, sunny day in mid-winter, can be seen flying about. The sun seems to bring them out of hibernation for a while and then they return to their little retreat.

Hornets have died out in their nests by this time. New queens (several per nest) have found a place to hibernate for the winter. I normally find several over wintering in my shop. In the spring, they will become active, form new nests and the process of nature starts all over again.

Winter is a good time to reflect on nature and dream a little about the coming spring and all it has to offer. Have a great holiday season!

