

## General Article

### BENEFICIAL INSECTS AND ITS IMPORTANCE IN AGRICULTURE

*Rakesh Kumar, Pooja Barthwal, Anshika, Aditya Sharma and Varun Sharma*

School of Agricultural Studies, Quantum University, Roorkee, Uttarakhand

Corresponding email: [rakeshpantento26@gmail.com](mailto:rakeshpantento26@gmail.com)

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#### Abstract

Beneficial insects are vital for maintaining agricultural productivity, ecosystem stability, and biodiversity. These insects mainly pollinators, predators, and parasitoids play a significant role in food production, pest control, and environmental well-being. Pollinators such as bees, butterflies, and hoverflies assist in the reproduction of over 75% of the world's crop species, which directly influences yield and quality. Predatory insects like lady beetles, lacewings, and ground beetles help to naturally control pest populations, thereby decreasing the need for chemical pesticides. Parasitoid wasps and flies offer precise biological control by parasitizing harmful pests. Furthermore, numerous beneficial insects contribute to nutrient recycling and the enhancement of soil health. Their preservation is crucial for sustainable agriculture and can be accomplished through habitat improvement, integrated pest management (IPM), and minimized pesticide application. Acknowledging and fostering beneficial insects is essential for developing resilient agro-ecosystems and ensuring long-term food security.

**Key Words:** Beneficial insects, Pollinators, Biological pest control, Sustainable agriculture, Integrated Pest Management (IPM), Agro-ecosystem resilience

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#### Introduction

The global human population has been increasing at a rapid pace, making food requirements a significant issue in contemporary times. To satisfy this demand, it is necessary to establish new areas for crop cultivation or enhance productivity in existing agricultural zones. Crop yield losses attributed to insects and other arthropods that consume cultivated plants, as well as plant pathogenic fungi, bacteria, and viruses (collectively referred to as 'pests'), are concerning (Oerke, 2006). Globally, pests are responsible for 30–40% of yield loss. Insects are the most successful animals on the planet regarding the number of individuals, species diversity, and habitat range due to various factors such as shorter life spans, higher reproductive rates, and lower body weights. Insects originated over 3 million years ago, and there are nearly 1 million known species of insects,

surpassing all other life forms, occupying almost every terrestrial habitat. Most insects found in gardens, yards, or crops do not harm or feed on plants; many are merely “passing through” or exhibit harmless behaviors. Some insects, however, prey on and eliminate pest species. The actions of these beneficial insects help prevent or significantly reduce pest issues in crops. Therefore, recognizing these beneficial insects is crucial for their appreciation and conservation. Beneficial insects are defined as those that fulfill essential roles in ecosystem functions, including dung burial, pollination, and pest control, with examples such as dung beetles and honeybees. Their health can be negatively impacted by pesticides, underscoring the importance of designing pesticides carefully to reduce toxicity. These insects contribute to crop production and the overall health of ecosystems. In fact, only about 1% of all insect species are classified as pests; the vast majority are either harmless or beneficial.

Numerous insects provide vital services, such as pollination by bees (both *Apis* and non-*Apis* species), flies (syrphid flies), butterflies, and moths, which fertilize flowers to enable fruit set and seed production. An environmentally sustainable approach to pest management involves introducing predators and parasitoids into agricultural fields or greenhouses, particularly in the cultivation of vegetable crops, soft fruits, and ornamental plants. The most frequently utilized predators for managing herbivorous pests include ladybirds (Coccinellidae), gall midge larvae (Cecidomyiidae), lacewing larvae (Chrysopidae), and hoverfly larvae (Syrphidae). Generalist predators, such as the common green lacewing (*Chrysoperla carnea*), primarily feed on aphids but also consume other small insects and their eggs. In contrast, specific predators like the green lacewing (*Ceraeochrysa cubana*) target a single pest species as their natural enemy.

### **Importance of Beneficial Insects:**

Beneficial insects are essential to agriculture and ecosystems. They serve as nature's pest controllers, pollinators, and decomposers, contributing to increased crop yields, decreased pesticide usage, and the preservation of biodiversity and soil health. In contrast to pests, these insects promote sustainable, eco-friendly, and productive farming practices.

#### *Pollination*

Function: They transfer pollen from the male to the female parts of flowers, facilitating the production of fruits and seeds.

Benefits:

- Enhances crop yield and quality
- Crucial for the production of fruits, vegetables, oilseeds, and nuts
- Fosters biodiversity among wild plants and ecosystems
- Crops reliant on pollinators include: apple, almond, mango, mustard, tomato, sunflower, cucumber, berries, and many others.

#### *Biological Pest Control*

Function: Predators and parasitoids naturally eliminate or suppress harmful insect populations.

Benefits:

- Diminishes pest outbreaks
- Reduces the need for chemical pesticides

- Averts the development of resistance in pests
- Conserves time, money, and environmental resources.

### *Soil and Ecosystem Health*

Function: Decomposers and detritivores decompose organic matter.

Benefits:

- Enhances soil fertility
- Improves nutrient cycling
- Supports the food web by providing prey for birds, reptiles, and amphibians.

### *Sustainable Agriculture*

- Encourages Integrated Pest Management (IPM) strategies
- Reduces cost of chemical inputs
- Maintains ecological balance
- Promotes biodiversity and resilience of agro ecosystems

## **Categories of Beneficial Insects**

Beneficial insects can be categorized into several important groups, each serving a unique purpose in farms and gardens.

### *Pollinators (Examples: Bees, Butterflies, and More)*

Insects that transfer pollen between flowers are vital for the production of fruits and seeds. Honey bees, bumblebees, and various wild bees rank among the most significant pollinators for food crops. Many flowering vegetables, fruits, nuts, and oilseeds rely on insect pollination: indeed, over 75% of the world's crop species gain from animal pollinators. Other insects also play a role: butterflies, moths, beetles, flies (such as hoverflies or syrphid flies), and even some wasps transport pollen while they feed on nectar. For instance, syrphid ("hover") flies often visit flowers for nectar and inadvertently pollinate plants. By helping flowers produce fruit, pollinators enhance both yields and quality (for example, resulting in larger strawberries or more beans per flower). (Increasing the availability of flowers and nesting habitats boosts pollinator populations, which subsequently aids in both fruit production and pest management.)

Besides bees, butterflies and moths are well-known pollinators that carry pollen as they explore blooms. Even tiny beetles and flies make contributions. These pollination services are directly advantageous to humans, as they allow us to cultivate fruits, vegetables, nuts, and seeds. (For instance, almond orchards and berry patches depend significantly on bees.) Thus, safeguarding pollinators is crucial: many agricultural guides emphasize that wild bees and other pollinators are "essential for the production of many crops." In summary, a diverse community of pollinating insects leads to increased and improved food harvests for farmers.

### *Predators (Lady Beetles, Lacewings, Spiders, etc.)*

Predatory insects are known for hunting and consuming other insects that damage crops. Common beneficial predators include lady beetles (often called ladybugs), lacewings, predatory ground beetles, assassin bugs, and predatory flies and wasps (which should not be confused with parasitoid wasps mentioned later). For instance, lady beetles (Coccinellidae)

are well-known for their ability to hunt aphids: both adults and larvae eagerly feed on aphids, mites, whiteflies, and other soft-bodied pests. Lacewing larvae, sometimes referred to as “aphid lions,” also prey on aphids, small caterpillars, insect eggs, and mites. Additional predators consist of ground beetles that dwell in the soil and consume grubs and cutworms, as well as syrphid fly larvae that feast on aphids and whiteflies. In many instances, a single predator can eliminate dozens or even hundreds of pests throughout its life. By controlling pest populations, these natural enemies help reduce the necessity for chemical sprays. (Importantly, most of these predators tend to *avoid* crops that have been treated with broad-spectrum insecticides – indicating that reducing harmful sprays can significantly enhance their populations.)

### *Parasitoids (Parasitic Wasps and Flies)*

Parasitoids are small insects, primarily tiny wasps and some flies that prey on pests. A female parasitoid deposits her eggs on or within a host insect, which is often a caterpillar, aphid, or beetle larva. Once the eggs hatch, the larvae of the parasitoid feed on the host from the inside, ultimately leading to the host's demise. Most parasitoids are very specialized, with each species focusing on one or a few specific pest types, making them highly effective biocontrol agents. For instance, a small ichneumon wasp can locate a caterpillar concealed in a plant, inject an egg, and transform that caterpillar into a breeding ground for its offspring. The overall result is natural pest control; “parasitoid wasps manage many common caterpillar pests in crops.” Similarly, beneficial parasitic flies, such as tachinids (family Tachnidae order Diptera), also target caterpillars and other pests. While these wasps and flies may often go unnoticed and are harmless to humans, they significantly improve crop protection by controlling outbreaks of caterpillars, borers, aphids, and various other pests.

### **Ecological and Agricultural Roles**

Beneficial insects play a vital role in agriculture and ecosystems through various means: pollination, natural pest control, and a range of ecological services.

#### *Pollination Services*

As mentioned, pollinators are crucial for enabling plants to produce fruit, seeds, or nuts. This process is vital for the productivity of fruit trees (like apples and peaches), berries (such as strawberries and blueberries), seed crops (including melons, squash, and sunflowers), and numerous vegetables. By visiting flowers to collect nectar and pollen, bees and other pollinators facilitate fertilization, which leads to increased yields. In the absence of pollinators, both yield and quality can decline significantly. The economic impact of insect pollination is staggering – for example, insect pollinators are estimated to contribute around \$34 billion annually to U.S. agriculture. Moreover, pollinators also enhance biodiversity by aiding in the reproduction of wild plants, thereby supporting the health of ecosystems.

#### *Biological Pest Control*

Predators and parasitoids create the community of “natural enemies” that help control crop pests. They exert top-down regulation of pest insects. For instance, lady beetles and lacewings can consume hundreds of aphids, thrips, or mite eggs throughout their lives. Parasitic wasps help manage caterpillar and beetle populations, often preventing explosive outbreaks. By limiting pest numbers, these natural enemies minimize crop damage and

reduce the reliance on chemical insecticides. In fact, biological control has preserved numerous crops: the introduction of predatory insects, such as the *Vidalia* beetle (*Radoliacardinalis*(Coleoptera: Coccinellidae) in citrus, has historically eliminated invasive pests.

When agricultural or natural environments are thriving, predators and parasitoids inhabit the farm and target pests as they appear. Their presence is crucial for pest management ecology: many farmers observe reduced pesticide expenses and improved yields when beneficial insects are plentiful. This support can translate to hundreds of dollars per acre, given the volume of pests consumed. On the other hand, indiscriminate insecticide application often backfires by exterminating predators, resulting in pest resurgence. Therefore, promoting biological control can stabilize pest populations and enhance crop resilience.

### *Biodiversity and Soil Health*

Beneficial insects also play a vital role in ecological health in less apparent ways. Many insects, including non-flying arthropods, assist in recycling organic matter and enhancing soil quality. For example, dung beetles eliminate and bury animal waste, returning nutrients to the soil; termites and beetle larvae decompose dead wood and plant material. These detritivores accelerate nutrient cycling and improve soil structure, indirectly supporting crop growth. Additionally, a diverse insect community sustains birds, reptiles, and other wildlife (as food or pollinators), thereby boosting overall farm biodiversity. In intricate landscapes featuring hedgerows and flower-rich field edges, insect diversity is greater, which in turn fosters more wildlife and healthier soils. Essentially, beneficial insects are essential components of the web of life on a farm includes essential roles such as pollinating crops, managing pests, and enhancing ecosystem services like soil fertility and water quality.

## **Various Farming Systems Demonstrate the Practical Benefits of Insects**

### *Organic and Agro ecological Farms*

By reducing the use of synthetic pesticides, organic farms typically support more abundant populations of predators, parasitoids, and pollinators. Techniques like companion planting, crop rotations, and polycultures increase habitat diversity. For example, interspersing sweet alyssum with vegetables can draw in hoverflies (which prey on aphids) and bees. Many growers of fruits and vegetables adopt this ecological strategy: research has shown that vegetable farms with flowering cover crops host significantly higher numbers of syrphid flies, lady beetles, and parasitic wasps compared to monoculture fields.

### *Cover Crops and Crop Rotations*

Implementing cover crops (such as crimson clover, buckwheat, or rye) offers nectar sources and safe havens for beneficial insects when main crops are not present. A USDA case study on cotton revealed that fields with winter cover crops attracted more predatory big-eyed bugs and lady beetles for the subsequent cotton crop. These predators migrated from the flowering cover into the cash crop, aiding in the suppression of aphids. As a result, certain pests (like bollworms and budworms) were found to remain below economic thresholds more frequently in cover-cropped fields than in conventionally planted ones. Similar advantages

are observed in orchard alleyways and vegetable rotations when cover plants that are friendly to pollinators and predators are utilized.

### *Integrated Pest Management (IPM)*

In numerous conventional farms, integrated pest management combines chemical controls with beneficial organisms. Extension programs focus on pest monitoring and targeted interventions to safeguard natural enemies. For instance, spraying is avoided during the blooming of weeds or flowers (to protect pollinators), and selective insecticides are chosen that have a reduced impact on bees and parasitoids.

### *Orchards and Specialty Crops*

In fruit orchards (such as apples, almonds, and cherries) and berry patches, pollination is a significant issue. Farmers frequently set up honey bee hives or promote wild pollinators to guarantee fruit production. These systems also gain from biological control: ground beetles and spiders in orchards hunt codling moth larvae and other pests. Numerous berry farms plant floral resources (like thyme and phacelia) to nourish bees, butterflies, and hoverflies. In these agricultural systems, growers experience clear advantages – bigger harvests and reduced pest control measures – when beneficial insects flourish.

### **Conserving and Promoting Beneficial Insects**

To make the most of beneficial insects, farmers and gardeners can implement a variety of strategies:

#### *Habitat Enhancement*

Creating flower-rich environments (such as flowering strips, cover crops, and hedgerows) to offer pollen, nectar, and shelter throughout the year. Research indicates that well-planned flower strips (featuring a mix of blooms) support insect populations consistently during the season. For instance, incorporating native wildflowers along the edges of fields significantly boosts the numbers of wasps and bees. Studies conducted in vineyards revealed that using perennial wildflower mixes not only provided a steady food source but also offered nesting sites, which greatly enhanced local predator and parasitoid populations. Similarly, hedgerows (composed of rows of native shrubs and trees) act as “living fences” that provide refuge for pollinators and predators. Thus, enhancing plant diversity on farms through the use of strips or margins is one of the most effective strategies to increase the population of beneficial insects and enhance biodiversity.

#### *Minimizing and Selective Use of Pesticides*

It's important to limit the use of broad-spectrum insecticides that can harm beneficial insects. Research indicates that nonselective pesticides (such as organophosphates, carbamates, or pyrethroids) tend to be more detrimental to natural enemies than to pests. To mitigate this, insecticides should be used sparingly and only applied when monitoring reveals a genuine threat. When sprays are necessary, opt for selective products (like Bt toxins targeting caterpillars) and apply them with care (steering clear of flowering plants, utilizing spot treatments, and spraying during the evening when bees are less active). By adhering to IPM guidelines – such as “refer to pest identification guides, employ spot or short-lived treatments, and refrain from spraying blooms” – farmers can effectively manage pests while

safeguarding pollinators and natural enemies. Over time, this approach fosters larger populations of beneficial insects that help control pest outbreaks, thereby decreasing the reliance on chemical interventions.

#### *Insectary and Companion Plants*

Deliberately cultivate plants that are known to nourish natural enemies. Numerous flowers (like buckwheat, phacelia, marigolds, and alyssum) provide the nectar that adult parasitoids and predators require. For example, a patch of buckwheat in a vegetable field can draw in parasitic wasps and hoverflies, which subsequently parasitize aphids and caterpillars on the main crop. Adding herbs such as dill, fennel, and coriander along field edges also attracts lacewings and ladybeetles. Cover crops can serve as insect habitats as well: red clover, for instance, provides sustenance for bees and predatory wasps. These methods are often referred to as “insectary planting” or “farmscaping.” They have demonstrated effectiveness in enhancing biological control: cover-cropped cotton fields exhibited a higher number of predators and fewer harmful pests compared to bare fields.

#### *Nesting and Overwintering Sites*

Numerous beneficial insects require habitats for their survival. For solitary bees, this entails unmaintained soil or designated "bee hotels" (composed of bundles of hollow stems or drilled wooden blocks). Lady beetles and lacewings find refuge during winter in debris; thus, leaving leaf litter from hedgerows, bark, or flower stalks throughout the winter months can provide them with shelter. Refraining from fall tillage in field margins helps to maintain dormant predators. Additionally, offering clean water sources, such as shallow ponds, can further assist bees and dragonflies. By perceiving farms as habitats rather than merely sources of crops, we facilitate beneficial insects in completing their life cycles.

#### *Diversified Cropping and Crop Rotation*

Implementing crop rotation and intercropping enhances landscape diversity, which subsequently fosters a greater number of beneficial insects. A rotation that includes legumes, cereals, and brassicas not only enriches the soil but also guarantees varying bloom periods. Diverse sequences of crops replicate the natural diversity of plants, thereby sustaining robust predator and pollinator communities throughout the seasons.

### **List of Beneficial Insects**

#### **A. Pollinators**

<b>Insect</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Honey bees ( <i>Apis</i> spp.)	Major pollinators	Fruits, oilseeds, vegetables
Bumble bees ( <i>Bombus</i> spp.)	Buzz pollination	Tomato, brinjal, berries
Butterflies (Papilionidae, nymphalidae)	Flower visiting and pollination	Flowers, herbs and vegetables
Hover flies (Syrphidae)	Pollination and aphid predation (nymphs)	Vegetable and fruits
Solitary bees (Carpenter bees, mason bees)	Effective, early pollination	Apple, almond and squash
Moths	Nocturnal pollination	Cotton and legumes

### B. Predators (Eat pest insects)

Insect	Target pests	Additional notes
Lady bird beetles (Coccinellidae) Seven spotted lady bird beetle: <i>Coccinella septempunctata</i> Zig Zag lady bird beetle: <i>Cheilomenessexmaculata</i> Striped lady bird beetle: <i>Cryptolaemusmontrouzieri</i> Transverse lady beetle: <i>Coccinella transversalis</i>	Aphids, whiteflies, scale insects	Active in all crops
Lace wing ( <i>Chrysoperla cornea</i> , Chrysopidae: Neuroptera)	Aphids, mealy bugs, mites	Larva called ant lion
Ground beetles (Cerabidae)	Soil pests lie cutworm	Found in soil
Minute pirate bugs ( <i>Orius</i> spp.)	Thrips, mites and aphids	Used in greenhouse
Assassin bugs (Reduviidae)	Caterpillars and beetles	Generalist predator
Big eyed bugs ( <i>Geocoris</i> spp.)	Mites, thrips and aphids	Active in cotton and corn

### C. Parasitoid (Kill pests by parasitism)

Insects	Host	Notes
Trichogramma	Eggs of Lepidopteran pests	Mass release for biocontrol
Braconid wasps (Braconidae) Hymenoptera	Aphids, caterpillar, beetle larvae (grubs)	Internal parasitoids
Ichneumon wasps (Ichneumonidae) Hymenoptera	Caterpillars, sawflies	Highly- host specific
Encarsia spp.	White flies	Used in greenhouse crops
Aphidius spp.	Aphids	Forms mummies; widely used in IPM
Tachnid flies (Tachnidae: Diptera)	Caterpillars, beetles	Lays eggs on pest body

### D. Decomposers/ soil Enhancers

Insect	Role	Benefit
Dung beetle (Sacarabidae)	Break down animal dung	Improve soil fertility
Termites (Isoptera)	Break down woody debris	Natural cycling
Spring tails (Collembola)	Feed on decaying matter	Enhance microbial activity
Ants (Formicidae)	Scavengers, decomposers	Soil aeration, pest predation

## Conclusion

In conclusion, beneficial insects serve as essential allies for both ecology students and farmers. They undertake functions that machines or chemicals cannot easily replicate: pollinating flowers, consuming pests, breaking down waste, and sustaining ecological equilibrium. By comprehending the roles of key groups – pollinators, predators, and parasitoids – farmers and gardeners can implement practices that preserve these valuable partners. Establishing flower strips and hedgerows, minimizing indiscriminate pesticide application, and fostering habitats on the farm all result in enhanced yields and sustainable production. As highlighted by research and extension services, a thriving farm ecosystem is abundant in beneficial insects. Educators and farmers can collaborate, gaining knowledge on how to identify and support native bees, ladybugs, lacewings, and wasps. Through science-based approaches and thoughtful habitat planning, we can leverage the benefits of beneficial insects to enhance crop production and safeguard the environment for future generations.

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