

A lesson from my garden

By Jim Eadie

Special to This Week

This past week I attended a community garden meeting, and rubbing shoulders with other gardening lovers has riveted my soul back to gardening again for another year, despite the current round of snow and cold weather. I am a lifelong vegetable gardener, and having spent a considerable part of my life in my gardens over the years, understand there is much more to gardening than just growing food. Some, for example, simply prefer to have a well-maintained lawn, and will get regular visits from a lawn care company like <https://www.lawncare.net/service-areas/new-york/> to service their lawns and recommend any treatments to keep it looking pristine.

A number of years ago I was surveying my plot thinking about getting a garden makeover done. I had plans of adding some extra lighting, getting the garden paving done, setting up a small pond in the backyard with water lilies in it, and many more. As I kept walking, I noticed a clump of several dozen aphids on a stalk of dill. My first thought was to squash the little "sap suckers" (like any good gardener should), but then I took a second look. To my amazement, a very interesting story was unfolding on that stalk of dill, and it held life lessons for me.

Small black ants were coming to and fro, and clearly tending to the aphids, even moving them about on the stalk. But several ladybugs were lurking on the flower head above. From time to time, they would descend in an attempt to grab an aphid. However, they were met by an angry ant which was clearly defending the aphids. Quicker on their feet, the lady bugs would retreat empty handed back up the stalk and hide, sometimes for as long as 20 minutes, before venturing out again for a possible meal. Every once in awhile a lady bug would score themselves a snack. This "dance of the insects" went on for days, and then weeks; I found myself checking every day.

In fact, the ants were milking a herd of aphids in a symbiotic relationship. Each one needed the other. The aphids suck sap from the plant and excrete a "honeydew" that is gathered by ants as a prized food. In addition, the ants move the aphids about on the plant to find better "pasture," and vigorously defend their stock against "wolves." The ladybugs are the predators, and have to continuously try to outsmart the farmer for a dinner. Keeping the flock of aphids at a reasonable size allows the dill plant to live a good life.

I was observing the delicate balance of nature, as demonstrated in a tiny little corner of my garden. In the end, everyone came out ahead, and by working together (even if it seemed some were sheep, and some were wolves) everyone benefited. And I harvested perfectly healthy dill for my pickles!

However, all is not as perfect as it seems. Small changes in one of the players here can change the equilibrium and everyone could lose, or be reduced to one big temporary winner. For example: squirt those aphids with insecticide, and everyone potentially suffers ? including me on a number of levels!

The good news is that even in relationships where things depend critically on each other, time can correct imbalances, and even lead to better outcomes for all if allowed.

This lesson I believe applies to our communities and neighbourhoods. We all need each other, every one of us. None of us can make it all by ourselves.

Current projects being undertaken by various passionate community members and groups to address such very real issues as poverty, wellness, food security, community safety, justice, and equality of opportunity benefit every one of us.

So grow a garden just to experience some of the best lessons in life. Talk to your neighbor in their garden, or at their community garden plot. We all have something to contribute to the conversation: every one of us!