



Henderson County Master Gardeners Weekly News Article

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Meet an Assassin

by Lydia Holley

While cutting down the dead leaves on an African iris (Dietes), I came upon several milkweed assassin bug nymphs (*Zelus longipes*). I was very excited to see them in my garden.

The milkweed assassin bug is not discriminating, eating earthworms, caterpillars, and the occasional bee. However, it is considered a beneficial predator as it also devours aphids, flies, mosquitoes, beetles, armyworms, tomato hornworms, stink bugs, leafhoppers, and mealy bugs. Most importantly, it will also eat the non-native Asian citrus psyllid.



The milkweed assassin bug is so named because of its resemblance to the milkweed bug (*Oncopeltus fasciatus*), which eats milkweed. Accumulating the milkweed's toxins, milkweed bugs are bright red as a warning to predators. Milkweed assassin bugs do not eat milkweed, but are also bright red in color. You can tell the two apart by the milkweed assassin bug's longer torso and white spots. They go through several instars, eventually becoming adults that sport wings.

Milkweed assassin bugs are occasionally called the long legged assassin bug, for obvious reasons. They have a sticky substance on their long legs, so it is easy for them to grab their prey. Members of the order Hemiptera, or true bugs, have sucking mouthparts called proboscis, and the milkweed assassin bug is no exception.

The proboscis of the milkweed assassin bug is long and sharp. It bends in segments, and when not in use, is usually tucked under its body. After capturing something, the milkweed assassin bug will use it to inject a special enzyme into the body of its prey. This special enzyme not only paralyzes its prey, it also dissolves tissue. The assassin bug can then again use its proboscis to suck up the juice.

As you can imagine, being pierced and injected with a deadly enzyme can be very painful. A milkweed assassin bug bite will usually not cause permanent damage to humans, although some assassin bugs may transmit disease. If you are bitten by an assassin bug, it is best to get immediate medical attention. Biting insects are just one reason I always wear gloves while working in the garden.

There are over 150 species of assassin bugs in North America. Different species may vary greatly in their shape, size, and color. The wheel bug (*Arilus cristatus*) is one assassin bug you may be familiar with. Another famous assassin bug is called the kissing bug (*Triatominae*) since it usually bites people on the mouth while they are sleeping.

If you see a milkweed assassin bug in your garden, be thankful for this beneficial predator, but take precautions to keep it from biting you or your pets.

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