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Milkweed Bugs By Lydia Holley

No one told me when I planted milkweeds I would also get milkweed bugs. But that is what happened. Everything was great for a couple of years. My milkweed bloomed, the butterflies came, seedpods formed, seeds were collected, and my milkweeds increased. It seemed like gardener heaven.

Then one day this summer, I noticed something odd on my milkweeds. Something red-orange. At first, I thought those bright spots were ladybugs, so I bent down to take a closer look with a broad smile on my face. My smile turned into a frown when I realized these were not ladybugs, but milkweed bugs. Although I hated to see these bugs on my milkweed plants, I was awed by the fact that they found my few plants. My garden is surrounded by acres of trees. These bugs must have very good noses indeed.



Milkweed bugs go through several instars. Adults have a black horizontal stripe in the middle of their orange body, with black dots shaped like diamonds on either end. Mother Nature has an amazing artistic flair. Their bright coloring is a warning to birds and other predators that they are poisonous, a result of their feeding on the stems and leaves of the milkweed.

Technically, these milkweed bugs are *Oncopeltus fasciatus*, also known as the large milkweed bug. These particular milkweed bugs are considered neither beneficial nor harmful, but mostly benign, since it depends upon your perspective whether they do harm to your garden. They feed primarily on the sap of the milkweed seeds. So, if you are trying to increase the number of milkweeds in your garden, you may not appreciate them. But many do appreciate a reduced amount of milkweed seeds, since milkweed can be prolific. Cattlemen especially appreciate fewer milkweed seeds because milkweed is toxic to cattle, sheep and horses. Although these animals will usually not forage on milkweed unless they are very hungry, cattlemen need to make certain hay is not contaminated with milkweed.

In my garden, I would like to increase the number of milkweed plants. So, I took care of the milkweed bugs organically by shaking them into a cup of soapy water. Unfortunately, it only took another week for my milkweeds to become infested again. The adults overwinter and lay their eggs on the next year's plant. I am afraid I will have to contend with this particular bug as long as I grow milkweed.

If you grow milkweed in your garden, you have now been warned. Monarchs may not be the only form of life you attract. You, too, may encounter the large milkweed bug. If you grow milkweed, chances are, they will come.

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