

Amazing Insects

By Tom McDonald

Our Sonoran Desert is home to interesting creatures who have developed some pretty amazing strategies to survive in the most bio-diverse desert in the world. Here are three examples from the insect world.



The tarantula hawk is the large, black and orange wasp you see flying slow and low over your garden. This gentle giant of the wasp world rarely stings humans and is named for its prey, the tarantula. The adult wasp survives mostly on nectar but hunts the spider as a food source for its young. Spying a tarantula, the 'hawk' swoops down to sting its victim, a sting that has been rated the second most painful sting in the world. But the sting is not fatal and only paralyzes the hapless spider. The wasp drags its victim to a hole it has either prepared or stolen nearby. Once the spider is ensconced in its tomb, the wasp lays its eggs on the spider's body which becomes a feast for its young. The wasp seals the entrance and calmly flies away, looking for its next victim.

The agave weevil also has a nasty way of providing food for its young. Its bite injects a bacteria into the host agave causing it to rot. The weevil lays its eggs near the wounds and, when the grubs hatch, they start feeding, spreading the infection throughout the plant. By the time we notice, the damage is done and the plant is beyond saving. Unfortunately, the only known defense against the weevil is to use some pretty strong chemicals which are best avoided by the casual gardener.

A third insect pest is the Tecoma Leaf Tier which gets its plant of choice, the yellow bells, orange jubilee, and cape honeysuckle of the Tecoma family. The 'tier' refers to the worm's habit of rolling itself in the plant's leaf when it pupates. A natural insecticide to battle the worm contains spores of a bacteria which attacks and destroys the worm is called *Bacillus thuringiensis* sub-species *Kurstaki* or Bt -k for short.

Isn't it ironic that one pest uses a bacteria as a strategy to reproduce and another bacteria is a strategy to destroy a different pest?

Join us at Smiling Dog Landscapes and learn more about life in our Sonoran Desert. To register, email us at info@smilingdoglandscapes.com or call 480-288-8749. All classes are free and start at 9 a.m.

- March 15th: Irrigation Class
- March 23rd: Coping with Critters!
- March 29th: Curandero Trail Walk