

Kids Ask Dr. Bug

Home to more than plants, kids ask Dr. Tamra Reall about the curious things found in the garden.

Here are answers to some of the “scarier” critter questions.

Why do female mosquitoes drink blood while males don't? Alexander, 14

Baby mosquitoes, called wrigglers because they wiggle down from the surface of the water, eat algae and plankton. As pupae, they don't eat. Upon emerging as adults, male and female mosquitoes eat plant nectar. When the female mosquito needs to grow eggs, she needs a lot of nutrients and blood is the perfect food. Make sure that you dump standing water after it rains or the sprinklers run so that there isn't a place for mosquitoes to lay their eggs. This helps you stay bite-free!



Why do insects eat poop? Trish, 12

Animals that eat feces are called coprophages. Coprophagous insects can digest the semi-digested food of other animals. Plant fibers can be difficult to digest so there are a lot of nutrients left after going through the first time. We're lucky that some insects, like dung beetles, are happy to eat and/or raise their families in feces because they break down and recycle these nutrients so more plants can grow. There is another reason, though, that insects eat frass, or insect poop. Some insects, like termites, need special organisms in their gut to digest their food. The only way for them to get these organisms is from their nestmates' frass.

Do eyelash mites grow wings? Ki, 15

Mites, like other arachnids such as spiders and ticks, do not have wings. As weird as it may seem, everyone has these microscopic mites. They are beneficial because they feed on dead skin cells around eyelashes and other hair follicles. If they do cause a problem, a dermatologist can help.

How do maggots turn into flies? Soren, 14

I often get asked about baby flies that grow up to be big flies. If a fly has wings, it is an adult and will not get any bigger. I'm impressed with your question because you already realize that maggots are the real baby flies! Just like a caterpillar goes through stages before becoming a butterfly, flies also have four stages: egg, larva, pupa, and adult. Maggots are the larval stage and, depending on the kind of fly, this stage can last days (example: fruit flies) to years (example: deer flies). After they eat enough, at the right temperature, and the right amount of time passes, they will pupate and become a winged adult.

Does poison ivy affect animals or just humans? Christian, 19

Leaflets three, let it be! This axiom is best followed by primates, including humans. Fortunately, other animals do not get a rash from poison ivy, but the urushiol oil can be carried on pets' fur. So, be careful after walking near this plant. The rash is actually an immune response and your body attacks its own skin cells. The plant isn't all bad, though. Poison ivy drupes, the fruit it produces, is an important food for birds and the leaves are eaten by deer and insects.

Tamra Reall (@MUExtBugNGarden) is a horticulture specialist for MU Extension – Urban West Region. For free, research-based gardening tips, call 816-833TREE (8733), email Mggkc.hotline@gmail.com, or visit extension2.missouri.edu. The University of Missouri is an equal opportunity/access/affirmative action/pro-disabled and veteran employer.