

# Stop Squishing Spotted Lanternflies

The humane gardener: Cultivating compassion for all creatures great and small.

Nancy Lawson September 14, 2023

*They're not the monsters they were once made out to be, and stepping on them isn't effective. So why are people still unleashing their fury on spotted lanternflies, and what should we be doing instead?*

I dreaded the day the first spotted lanternflies would show up in my habitat, but not for the reasons you might think. I dreaded it because I knew what would accompany the arrival of these insects in my region: a flood of frantic posts and messages sounding hyper-alarm bells: “Oh no! Is this a spotted lanternfly?! I squished it! Will they destroy all my plants?”

I'd seen similar hype-induced fears before, about a decade ago when headlines warned of an “invasion” of brown marmorated stink bugs. The stink bugs had no predators, we were told, and they were going to destroy crops and take over our homes each winter in perpetuity. And for a couple of years, they did proliferate, even eating the sunflower seedlings I grew in the basement in the early spring.

It wasn't long, though, before word got out about the tastiness of stink bugs — to the praying mantises in search of an easy meal, to the Carolina wrens who began hanging out near our window screens all day and divebombing for stink bugs, and even to the jumping spiders who came indoors for the winter and took advantage of the bounty. (I've always liked the little stinkers and their gentle ways, so I found the jumping spider attack rather hard to witness.)

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**Are brown marmorated stink bugs still an issue? For homeowners? For farmers?**

**Do predators like praying mantises, Carolina wrens, and jumping spiders significantly reduce brown marmorated stink bug populations?**

My first exposure to the spotted lanternfly was in the form of photos on branded collateral at a university agricultural fair six years ago. There were keychains, stickers, hats—every bit of swag imaginable to encourage us to stamp out this strangely beautiful insect who looked like a moth, carried the name “fly,” but was really a large planthopper from Asia. If the promotional materials were to be believed, these menaces were going to destroy crops, kill trees, and generally commit crimes against nature everywhere they went. Their host plant in their native lands, tree of heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*), was also invasive here and was going to further exacerbate the problem.

When I arrived home, I promptly researched the species and found that some sources—even back then—acknowledged that the biggest problem for homeowners would be the sticky honeydew emitted onto patio furniture by lanternflies. To me, this didn’t seem like a very good reason to encourage mass violence toward them.

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**For the average resident, is sticky honeydew emitted on patio furniture a problem?**

**What other issues can sticky mildew cause?**

**How might sticky honeydew affect our economy?**

But in the intervening years, between the time lanternflies showed up in Pennsylvania and the time they made their way to my region here in Maryland, we've seen unnecessary harm and suffering inflicted on wildlife in the name of catching a few spotted lanternflies, including the use of sticky tape around trees that entangles and kills birds and other animals. And now we're seeing the unnecessary destruction of native trees. In a local Facebook group dedicated to native plants, one man recently described taking down his river birches simply because spotted lanternflies had gathered on the trunk. Last month, a neighbor of mine pointed to our hickories with dismay and said they were the invasive tree of heaven. How many native trees have been needlessly blamed and removed, all in the name of a cause that's dubious at best?

Spotted lanternflies have not lived up to their foreshadowed reputation. In early 2022, Penn State published an article dispelling the myths that had grown up around them, advising readers that lanternflies rarely kill trees. In August, researchers there published results showing that so far, the insects have not caused nearly as much damage to hardwood trees as once feared. "[I]n a natural setting where the insects are constantly on the move," they wrote, "we would not expect significant negative impacts on forest or ornamental trees."

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**What precautions can be taken to prevent sticky tape traps from harming birds and other animals?**

**What would be an alternative to removing a tree that attracts spotted lanternflies?**

**What are characteristics of tree-of-heaven that make them easy to identify?**

Other entomologists and ecologists have admitted as much too, yet in a recent *New York Times* piece, they still defended their mass-squishing campaigns. Cornell University entomologist Daniel Gilrein noted there was scant evidence that stomping would reduce populations in any significant way, wrote *Times* reporter Claire Fahy, “but he noted that the communal effort ‘helps engage the public’ and leads people to feel ‘somewhat empowered.’ ”

Empowered to do what, I wonder, aside from continuing to divide the world up into “good insects” versus “bad insects” and further inflicting our own rigid thinking onto the natural world? What are we teaching our children when we read books to them about being kind to caterpillars and spiders one day and give them free range to stomp all over lanternflies the next? If only we spent half as much time getting to know, say, the native planthoppers and the native trees in our midst as we do stomping lanternflies and destroying plants, we could make a much greater, more positive difference for nature. As I wrote in my new book *Wildscape*, I could find little information about the two-striped planthopper I’d been observing in my backyard one summer during the pandemic—because few researchers study these tiny insects. But the Internet overflowed with information about spotted lanternflies, and there was no shortage of people happy to discuss the impending doom they were about to cause.

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**Why might people feel ‘somewhat empowered’ by stomping spotted lanternflies? What might they feel empowered to do?**

**Why do we consider some insects to be “bad”?**

**Why do you think there is so little research on native planthoppers?**

**How might the spotted lanternfly affect populations of native plant hoppers?**

I appreciate the work of scientists who monitor the introductions of new organisms and help farms and vineyards, where grapevine monocultures are said to be particularly vulnerable. Yes, we all need to eat, and many of us enjoy a glass of wine and are grateful to those who produce it. But why do we need to extend efforts to protect crops to all the other lands around us? If we truly want to engage the public, wouldn't it be so much better to ask folks to simply observe the insects rather than inflict violence upon them?

If spotted lanternflies are so attracted to grapevines, for example, I wonder how they behave around the wild grapevines that are plentiful in my own habitat and other wildlife-friendly areas? How do those grapevines respond, and how is their growth affected (or not affected)? What could we learn simply by watching the response of trees like the young staghorn sumac I saw turning brown earlier in the summer when it was covered in lanternfly nymphs during a prolonged drought, only to watch it bounce back taller and greener and stronger than ever now?

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**Why do we need to extend efforts to protect crops to all the other lands around us?**

**How do you think spotted lanternflies behave around wild grapevines?**

**How do you think the grapevines respond and how is their growth affected?**

We need to take a step back, calm down, and stop giving in to our basest instincts. I once let that fear and reactivity get the best of me too, many years ago when I first started gardening and the trendy scare of the day involved Japanese beetles. We were told to hang traps or drown them, and for a time I did push them into jars of soapy water, even though I hated doing it. Eventually I asked my husband to do it—the ultimate copout. We stopped because one day my niece, who enjoyed helping me rescue “little fellas”—the name we gave to insects who’d fallen into the pool—saw a jar of the dead beetles hidden away behind the potting bench. She carried it over to us, looked up at me, and said with the gut-punching look of a betrayed child: “I thought you liked the little fellas.” I did, and I do, and I never did that again. And since then, nature has created much more balance here anyway, as our mountain mints and bonesets grew and started attracting bluewinged wasps, who lay their eggs on the larvae of Japanese beetles and provide a better natural control than anything we humans could ever devise.

Let’s stop repeating the same cycles of needless destruction. Let’s stomp out violence and reactive behaviors and narrow thinking, not lanternflies.

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**What has your experience been with Japanese beetles? What tactics if any have you used to manage their populations?**

**In looking for biological control of spotted lanternflies, what types organisms might researchers look for?**