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Beneficial Insects for Healthy Crops

Shashikala B [*a], Mobashshir Kabiraj [b] Vivek Kumar Srivastava [c] and Manoj Kumar Singh [d]

[a] *PhD Scholar, Division of Entomology, ICAR-IARI, New Delhi*

[b] *M.Sc. (Ag) Entomology, Division of Entomology, Faculty of Agriculture, Sher-e-Kashmir University of Agricultural Sciences and Technology of Kashmir*

[c] *Assistant Professor, Department of Entomology, Kulbhaskar Ashram PG Collage Prayagraj (Professor Rajendra Singh (Rajju Bhayya) University Prayagraj U P India)*

[d] *Assistant Professor, Department of Horticulture, Kulbhaskar Ashram PG Collage Prayagraj (Professor Rajendra Singh (Rajju Bhayya) University Prayagraj U P India)*

***Corresponding Author Email:** shashikalasunanda.2000@gmail.com

Abstract

Beneficial insects are essential components of sustainable crop production because they naturally regulate pest populations, support pollination, and contribute to ecological stability. Predators such as ladybird beetles, lacewings, hoverflies, predatory bugs, and mantids feed on important agricultural pests, while parasitoids such as *Trichogramma*, *Aphidius*, braconid, and ichneumonid wasps suppress pest populations by developing on or within their hosts. Conservation of these insects can reduce dependence on chemical pesticides and strengthen integrated pest management programmes. Habitat diversification, flowering plants, field margins, reduced pesticide use, and biological-control releases can improve the abundance and effectiveness of natural enemies. Beneficial insects also provide important pollination services in many horticultural and seed-producing crops. Their conservation is therefore important for maintaining biodiversity, improving crop health, reducing environmental risks, and promoting resilient agricultural systems. Integrating beneficial insects with modern pest-monitoring and precision-management approaches can further improve sustainable crop protection.

Keywords: *Beneficial insects; Biological control; Natural enemies; Pollination; Pest management; Integrated pest management; Sustainable agriculture.*

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Introduction

Insects are often associated with crop damage, but only a small proportion of insect species are actually harmful to agriculture. A large number of insects perform valuable ecological services that support crop production, including pest suppression, pollination, decomposition, nutrient cycling, and maintenance of ecological balance. Among these, predatory and parasitic insects are particularly important because they naturally regulate populations of crop pests. Such insects are commonly referred to as beneficial insects or natural enemies.

Beneficial insects can reduce the dependence on chemical pesticides by feeding on or parasitizing harmful insects. Ladybird beetles, lacewings, praying mantids, dragonflies, predatory bugs, parasitoid wasps, and hoverfly larvae are some important examples. Their activities can be especially valuable in integrated pest management (IPM), where biological control is combined with cultural, mechanical, botanical, and chemical methods.

Modern agriculture faces increasing challenges from insecticide resistance, pesticide residues, environmental contamination, and loss of biodiversity. Conserving beneficial insects

provides an environmentally sound approach to pest management. Farmers can encourage their populations by maintaining flowering plants, reducing unnecessary pesticide applications, protecting field margins, and providing suitable habitats. The identification, behaviour, feeding habits, and ecological functions of beneficial insects is therefore essential for sustainable crop production. Their protection is not merely an environmental concern; it is also an important component of maintaining healthy, productive, and resilient agricultural systems.

Major Groups of Beneficial Insects

Beneficial insects can broadly be divided into predators, parasitoids, and pollinators. Predators actively capture and consume several prey individuals during their lifetime. Parasitoids develop on or inside a host insect and eventually kill it. Pollinators transfer pollen between flowers and contribute directly to seed and fruit production.

Predatory Insects

Predatory insects consume aphids, caterpillars, whiteflies, thrips, mites, beetle larvae, and other agricultural pests. Both immature and adult stages may be predatory, although feeding habits vary among species.

Ladybird beetles (Coccinellidae) are among the best-known beneficial insects. Both adults and larvae of many species feed on aphids, mealybugs, scale insects, whiteflies, and other soft-bodied pests. A single predator can consume a substantial number of aphids during its development, making ladybird beetles valuable in vegetable, fruit, pulse, and field crops.

Green lacewings (Chrysopidae) are also important predators. Their larvae, often called aphid lions, actively attack aphids, thrips, whiteflies, mites, and small caterpillars. Adults of many species primarily feed on nectar, pollen, or honeydew and therefore benefit from flowering vegetation.

Hoverflies (Syrphidae) provide another important form of biological control. Adult hoverflies are attracted to flowers, while larvae of many species consume large numbers of aphids. Their presence in flowering field margins can therefore provide both pollination and pest-control services.

Praying mantids are generalist predators that capture grasshoppers, caterpillars, moths, flies, and other insects. Although they may also consume beneficial insects, they contribute to the natural regulation of insect populations and are part of diverse agricultural food webs.

Predatory bugs, including assassin bugs, damsel bugs, minute pirate bugs, and big-eyed bugs, prey on a wide range of crop pests. They can be particularly useful against aphids, thrips, mites, insect eggs, and small larvae.

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Parasitoid Insects

Parasitoids differ from predators because their immature stages develop in association with a single host insect. The developing parasitoid eventually kills the host. Many parasitoids are highly specific to particular pest groups, making them valuable biological-control agents.

Trichogramma species are tiny parasitoid wasps that attack the eggs of several moth and butterfly pests. They are widely used in biological control programmes because they can prevent pests from reaching the damaging larval stage.

Braconid and ichneumonid wasps parasitize caterpillars, aphids, beetle larvae, and other insects. These parasitoids can significantly suppress pest populations under suitable environmental conditions.

Aphidius species are important parasitoids of aphids. After parasitization, the aphid becomes swollen and develops into a characteristic dried structure called a “mummy.” Adult parasitoids emerge from these mummies and continue the biological-control cycle.

Table: Important Beneficial Insects and Their Functions

Beneficial insect	**Major pest targets**	**Main function**
Ladybird beetles	Aphids, whiteflies, scales	Predation
Green lacewings	Aphids, thrips, mites	Predation
Hoverflies	Aphids	Predation and pollination
Trichogramma wasps	Moth and caterpillar eggs	Egg parasitism
Braconid wasps	Caterpillars, aphids	Parasitism
Ichneumonid wasps	Caterpillars and larvae	Parasitism
Assassin bugs	Caterpillars, aphids, bugs	Predation
Damsel bugs	Aphids, caterpillars, eggs	Predation
Big-eyed bugs	Aphids, thrips, eggs, mites	Predation
Dragonflies	Flies, mosquitoes and small insects	Predation

Beneficial Insects as Natural Pest Controllers

One of the most important contributions of beneficial insects is the natural suppression of pest populations. In an agricultural ecosystem, pest insects are part of a complex food web. When natural enemies are abundant, they can prevent pest populations from increasing rapidly.

For example, aphids reproduce quickly and may reach damaging levels in crops such as vegetables, pulses, oilseeds, and fruit plants. Ladybird beetles, lacewing larvae, hoverfly larvae, and aphid parasitoids can collectively suppress aphid populations. This natural regulation may reduce the need for repeated insecticide applications.

Caterpillars and moth larvae can be attacked by parasitoid wasps and predatory bugs. Egg parasitoids such as Trichogramma can reduce pest populations before larvae begin feeding extensively on plants. Early intervention through biological control is particularly valuable because preventing pest establishment is generally easier than controlling a severe infestation.

Natural enemies also contribute to pest population stability. Complete elimination of a pest is usually neither necessary nor desirable.

Maintaining pest populations below economically damaging levels allows natural enemies to survive and continue providing biological-control services.

Role in Integrated Pest Management

Beneficial insects form a central component of Integrated Pest Management (IPM). IPM emphasizes monitoring pest populations, identifying economic thresholds, conserving natural enemies, and selecting appropriate control measures. Rather than automatically spraying pesticides when insects are observed, farmers can first determine whether the insect is harmful or beneficial. Regular field scouting helps identify both pest and natural-enemy populations. If natural enemies are already suppressing the pest, unnecessary pesticide application can be avoided.

Biological control may involve three approaches:

1. **Conservation biological control** – protecting naturally occurring beneficial insects in and around crops.
2. **Augmentative biological control** – releasing additional beneficial insects or parasitoids to increase their population.
3. **Classical biological control** – introducing natural enemies to control invasive or introduced pests under scientifically regulated programmes.

Among these approaches, conservation is often the simplest and most economical for farmers because it relies on naturally occurring organisms. Providing suitable habitat and reducing harmful disturbances can substantially improve their survival.

Flowering Plants and Habitat Management

Beneficial insects require more than prey. Many adult parasitoids and predators depend on nectar, pollen, water, shelter, and alternative food sources. Cropping systems that provide only one crop species may offer limited resources outside pest outbreaks. Planting flowering species around field boundaries can provide nectar and pollen to adult parasitoids, hoverflies, lacewings, and other insects. Plants such as coriander, fennel, marigold, sunflower, sesame, buckwheat, and selected flowering weeds can serve as useful resources when appropriately managed.

Field margins, hedgerows, grasses, and diversified vegetation can also provide shelter and overwintering sites. Maintaining such habitats creates ecological refuges where beneficial insects can reproduce and survive periods when crop pests are scarce. Crop diversification through intercropping and rotation can further improve habitat complexity. A diverse agricultural landscape generally provides more feeding and shelter opportunities than a simplified monoculture.

Impact of Pesticides on Beneficial Insects

Although pesticides can provide rapid pest suppression, indiscriminate use may also harm beneficial insects. Broad-spectrum insecticides can kill predators and parasitoids along with target pests. Repeated applications may therefore disrupt biological control and cause secondary pest outbreaks. Some pesticides can have sublethal effects, including reduced feeding, reproduction, movement, orientation, or host-finding ability. Even when insects do not die immediately, their contribution to pest suppression may be reduced.

Farmers can minimize these effects by:

- Monitoring pest populations before spraying.
- Avoiding unnecessary insecticide applications.
- Selecting selective or relatively natural-enemy-friendly products where appropriate.
- Applying pesticides at recommended doses.
- Avoiding spraying during periods of high pollinator activity.
- Targeting affected crop areas rather than spraying unnecessarily large areas.

- Allowing beneficial insects to recolonize fields after treatment.

Pesticide decisions should therefore consider both the target pest and the wider insect community.

Beneficial Insects and Pollination

Not all beneficial insects are primarily pest predators. Pollinating insects are equally important to agricultural production. Bees, hoverflies, butterflies, moths, beetles, and other insects transfer pollen between flowers, supporting fruit and seed formation. Many horticultural crops depend strongly on insect-mediated pollination. Better pollination can improve fruit set, fruit shape, seed development, yield, and quality. Providing flowering resources and avoiding pesticide exposure during peak pollinator activity can support these services. Pollinator conservation should be integrated with pest-management practices. A field containing diverse flowering plants can simultaneously support pollinators and natural enemies, creating multiple ecological benefits.

Biological Control Through Insect Releases

Commercial production of beneficial insects has expanded the possibilities for biological pest management. Farmers can obtain parasitoids and predators from biological-control laboratories and release them in crops at appropriate stages.

Trichogramma cards are commonly used for releasing egg parasitoids in several cropping systems. Other commercially available biological-control agents may include predatory mites, lacewings, ladybird beetles, and parasitoid wasps.

Successful release programmes depend on correct identification, suitable timing, adequate release rates, favourable environmental conditions, and proper monitoring. Biological control should not be viewed as a single application that immediately eliminates pests. Instead, it is a population-management strategy requiring regular observation.

Beneficial Insects in Different Cropping Systems

The importance of beneficial insects varies according to crop, climate, pest complex, and production system.

In **vegetable crops**, ladybird beetles, lacewings, hoverflies, predatory bugs, and parasitoid wasps can suppress aphids, whiteflies, thrips, and caterpillars.

In **fruit crops**, parasitoids and predators can help regulate aphids, scales, mealybugs, leaf-feeding caterpillars, and other pests. Flowering vegetation around orchards can also provide resources for natural enemies and pollinators.

In **pulse crops**, predators and parasitoids contribute to the management of pod borers, aphids, whiteflies, and other insect pests. Maintaining ecological diversity can enhance natural pest suppression.

In **oilseed crops**, flowering plants can attract pollinators as well as predatory insects. Natural enemies may help suppress aphids, caterpillars, and other damaging insects.

In **rice and cereal systems**, spiders, predatory bugs, beetles, dragonflies, and parasitoid wasps contribute to the regulation of insect pests. Reducing unnecessary insecticide use can help maintain these naturally occurring populations.

Farmer-Friendly Strategies for Conserving Beneficial Insects

Farmers can adopt several practical measures to increase beneficial insect activity without making major changes to the cropping system.

First, identify insects before controlling them. Not every insect found on a crop is a pest. Farmers and field workers should learn to recognize common predators, parasitoids, and pollinators.

Second, maintain flowering resources. Flowering plants provide nectar and pollen that support adult parasitoids and many predators.

Third, avoid routine pesticide spraying. Insecticides should preferably be applied on the basis of pest monitoring and economic thresholds.

Fourth, maintain crop diversity. Intercropping, crop rotation, and suitable border vegetation can create more favourable conditions for beneficial organisms.

Fifth, protect field refuges. Small areas of natural or semi-natural vegetation can serve as breeding and shelter sites.

Sixth, use biological-control agents when appropriate. Commercially produced parasitoids and predators can supplement natural populations.

Seventh, monitor natural enemies along with pests. Recording both groups provides a more accurate picture of the field's biological balance.

Role of Farmers, Extension Workers and Researchers

Successful conservation of beneficial insects requires cooperation among farmers, extension professionals, researchers, and agricultural institutions. Farmers need practical knowledge about insect identification, pest thresholds, pesticide selection, and habitat management.

Extension workers can demonstrate insect identification through field schools, demonstrations, photographs, mobile applications, and farmer training programmes. Researchers can develop locally adapted biological-control strategies and evaluate the compatibility of pesticides with beneficial organisms. Digital agriculture can further support beneficial-insect conservation. Smartphone-based insect identification, field scouting applications, remote monitoring, and decision-support systems can help farmers distinguish pests from natural enemies and make more informed management decisions.

Future

The future of sustainable crop protection will increasingly depend on integrating biological processes with modern agricultural technologies. Beneficial insects can become an important component of precision pest management when their populations are monitored alongside crop pests. Artificial intelligence and image-recognition technologies may help identify insects directly from field photographs. Geographic information systems and remote sensing can identify habitats suitable for natural enemies. Automated monitoring devices may also provide information about insect abundance and activity. Climate change presents both opportunities and challenges. Temperature, rainfall, humidity, and changing crop patterns can alter the distribution and effectiveness of beneficial insects. Therefore, biological-control programmes need to consider local environmental conditions and changing pest dynamics. The long-term objective should not be simply to increase the number of beneficial insects, but to create functional agricultural ecosystems in which natural enemies, pollinators, crops, soil organisms, and farmers interact in a balanced manner.

Table: Key Practices for Farmers

Practice	Benefit to beneficial insects
Maintain flowering plants	Provides nectar and pollen
Reduce unnecessary spraying	Protects predators and parasitoids
Monitor pests and natural enemies	Supports informed decisions
Maintain field margins	Provides shelter and breeding sites
Diversify cropping systems	Improves habitat availability
Use selective pesticides	Reduces non-target effects
Release biological-control agents	Strengthens natural pest suppression
Protect pollinator habitats	Improves pollination services

Conclusion

Beneficial insects are essential components of healthy agricultural ecosystems. Predators and parasitoids naturally suppress crop pests, while pollinators support fruit and seed production. Their conservation can reduce dependence on chemical pesticides, improve ecological stability, and contribute to sustainable crop production. Farmers can strengthen these natural services by protecting habitats, maintaining flowering resources, monitoring pest and natural-enemy populations, and adopting selective pest-management practices. Integrating beneficial insects into modern crop protection therefore offers a practical pathway toward healthier crops, safer production systems, and greater long-term agricultural sustainability.

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