

The Praying Mantis: An Intriguing Insect!

By Alice Batsche

If you look very closely, you may be able to find a Praying Mantis in your yard, even though they practically disappear on stems and leaves. Considered a gift to gardeners, the mantids eat only live prey such as beetles, crickets, cockroaches, aphids and butterflies. For some reason, they will not eat ants!

The European Mantis (*mantis religiosa*) is the most common type found in North America. It is pale green, about two inches long, and most likely came from Europe with trade ships about a century ago. However, there are about 2,000 types of mantids worldwide with most living in Asia and tropical forests. All have big eyes, triangular heads and three pairs of legs.

Having an alien look, this fascinating bug can swivel its head 180 degrees due to a very flexible neck. It has two large compound eyes with three smaller simple eyes in between allowing them to detect movement sixty feet away. Amazingly, the mantis has an “ear” on its abdomen. Well, not an ear like ours, but a round organ that uses the same ultrasonic frequency as bats. This is very helpful because bats are the biggest predators of the Praying Mantis. Their antennae are used for sensing smells.

Mantis comes from the Greek word “mantikos” meaning soothsayer or prophet. In many cultures the mantis is a symbol of meditation and calmness. Since this insect holds its forelegs in a bent position resembling a pious stance, it is aptly named. These forelegs have spiky rows that catch and pin prey in place.

Spring is the time of year to look for newly hatched Praying Mantises, called “nymphs”. Looking exactly like mini adults, they simultaneously emerge from the egg case and are ravenous! Nearby siblings are usually a first meal for them. The nymphs have no wings yet so they quickly jump from plant to plant feasting on flies, aphids and small grasshoppers.

Summer finds the mantis developing wings midway down its back. Even though the mantis can walk, leap and fly it much prefers to remain in stealthy silence camouflaged on its chosen stem. When you see a mantis hanging upside down, it is most likely molting which it does about twelve times as it grows. The female will fly when she wants to mate. She is larger than the male and will eat the male if she is hungry or if he is too slow to get away.

Autumn is when the female spins an egg case, called “ootheca”, to protect the eggs during cold weather until spring. Each case is about one inch long and is white at first then turns to brown. The female dies about two weeks after laying from 40-100 eggs. Total mantis lifespan is about six months.

If you are lucky enough to find a Praying Mantis you could keep one as a pet. Just remember they only eat live prey!