# Garden Curiosities

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## A closer look at another vital world

Earth, the blue and white beauty seen from the space station, provides habitat for a myriad of species. Species so striking and unusual we could be looking at another world.

Take the "mousies" for instance. These unusual "worms" were brought in to our Burlington Plant Clinic by a curious local gardener wanting to know what they were and what their role was in our gardens. That is, were they beneficial, interesting, a pest, or some combination?

The larger one's body was an inch long, not including the "tail", and he readily escaped from the Petrie dish making for a "get away." Please meet the maggot of a hover fly (the "mousie") in the genus *Eristalis.*

Hover flies are also known as flower flies or *Syrphid* flies. This particular one is also known as a "drone" fly. These are the pollinators flying about your garden like little helicopters. The adults feed on nectar from flowers, make vertical and horizontal moves and can "hover" in place. They come in a range of sizes. Their coloring is usually black or dark brown with yellow, yellow-orange or white stripes like a wasp or bee. This type of mimicry is called *Batesian*. Unlike the wasps or bees they only have one pair of wings and no pinched waist, so they are flies.

The maggot is the larvae of a fly. This maggot was found in debris laden water in the hollow of a tree. They are recyclers (as are many maggots), meaning they help to break down living or formerly living plants or other organic matter. They may be found in stagnant water, sewage or moist excrement. The water usually contains little or no oxygen so the maggot breathes through the "tail", the long thin tube that trails the body and extends to the surface of the water. Hence the common name of "rat-tailed" maggot. They move to a drier place to undergo pupation.

These flies have never been implicated as disease vectors considering their habitat. They should not be a problem if sewage and manure are not allowed to accumulate in pits, ponds or streams.

The coral and neon green maggot was found with many others on a branch of *Acer palmatum* (Japanese maple) after the leaves had fallen. It and its brothers and sisters were busy cleaning up aphids which had infested the tree. These larval predators can consume 40-50 aphids a day before reaching a size to undergo metamorphosis. The adult hover flies are pollinators of food crops and flowers in your garden.

A “mousie” in soil, about an inch long. *Photo by Virgene Link / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

Welcome these doubly beneficial insects to your garden. They are not bees so they cannot sting you, nor do they bite. Protect them by restricting use of pesticides and herbicides. Insecticidal soap does not discriminate. It kills beneficial insects too!

Plant a wide variety of flowering plants like dill, borage, coriander, lavender, dahlias and nasturtiums to name a few. Tolerate a few aphids so they have a food source. They also consume black fly and green fly larvae and adults. These little “aliens” are working for the beauty and productivity of your garden.

When the movie industry wants ideas for **aliens,** they need look no further than our natural world.

**RESOURCES:**

- http://entnemdept.ufl.edu/creatures/livestock/rat-tailed_maggot.htm
- https://www.whatsthatbug.com/2005/11/19/rat-tailed-maggot-2/

Note: some hyperlinks in this article have been updated since its initial publication.

LEFT: Hover fly maggot / Photo by WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners. RIGHT: Mousie in petrie dish / Photo by Virgene Link / WSU Skagit County Master Gardener.