FLOWER FLIES

Diptera: Syrphidae

Bug of the Month

Have you ever seen a bee hover perfectly still, tiny wings beating so fast its body nearly looks suspended in midair? Perhaps it disappears for a moment here or there, but it swings back into position just as suddenly as it left, buzzing away for minutes on end.

More than likely, this black and yellow endurance-flyer is actually a species of fly in the family Syrphidae, commonly known as flower flies or hover flies. Though mimicking a bee or wasp to ward off predators, flower flies cannot sting or bite humans. If you are lucky enough to spot one resting on a leaf, you might notice its large compound eyes and a single pair of wings, similar to those of a common house fly.

Unlike the common house fly though, many of the over 6,000 described species of flower flies spend their days foraging from nectar-filled flowers, seeking the perfect spot to lay their eggs, and showing off their impressive hovering stamina to any passing female flies (and, of course, rival males). Though not as well studied as the charismatic bees that they mimic, flower flies are known to act as both generalist and specialist pollinators for flowering plants around the world, second only to bees in their pollinating impact, by some scientists' rankings.

Flower fly larvae are also considered beneficial by farmers and gardeners, oftentimes being voracious predators of aphids and thrips. In non-predatory species, the tiny maggots are typically detritivores, eating decaying plant matter. In an extreme example, the rat-tailed maggot lives in and eats organic matter in manure and stagnant, polluted water before embarking on its pollen-filled adult life.

The duality of use that flower flies' short lifespans can provide growers makes them attractive candidates for field introduction, maximizing both pollination and biological pest control or waste decomposition, depending on specific species.

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