

Doon Watch Nature Series for Dehradun Live Hindustan Times by Sanjay Sondhi

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Life on the *Bhindi* plant

Sitting out in our backyard, I was observing life in our kitchen garden, tended to lovingly by my wife, Anchal. We have a neat arrangement-she tends to the garden with little help from me, while I get to observe funky stuff and write about it. I can sense some trouble brewing here!

This morning, I was watching the *Bhindi* plant, also called Lady's finger. Over the past few months, the *Bhindi* plant had provided us with loads to eat, and it was now at the end of its fruiting cycle. The plant had grown to height of over 6 feet, and some of the remaining "fruit" on the vegetable plant were almost a foot in length.

Making merry on the plant were a host of insects. Small black-and-orange beetles embroidered the leaves with small circular holes, as they ate their way to health. Numerous small black ants, hovered around some aphids. Aphids are small bugs, with whom the ants have a symbiotic relationship. While the ants provide the aphids protection, the aphids in turn provide the ants with honeydew which they secrete. Near the ants and the aphids, sat a large, brown grasshopper, haughtily enjoying his "size" superiority over the smaller creatures.

The most intriguing of the insects on the *Bhindi* plant were small, half-inch sized red bugs. Called the Cotton Stainer Bugs, these insects were present in large numbers on the leaves of the *Bhindi*. The Cotton Stainer Bugs are red coloured insects with black markings on the wing. Underneath, the insect's abdomen is striped with red and white. These insects are "true bugs" and belong to the order Hemiptera, while the family that this species belongs to is called Pyrrhocoridae. These bugs are found commonly throughout the world, and many of them can be seen in your own garden.

Many of the Cotton Stainer Bugs were mating. I even saw some young ones. The nymphs, as the young ones of insects are called, are easy to recognize, as they are smaller, and lack the wings of the adults. The Cotton Stainer Bugs were observed feeding on the plant's sap, with many of them clustered

around at the same place. I noticed something-while the other insects on the plant did not hesitate to socialize (perhaps wishing each other a Happy Diwali, saying “we survived another Diwali, what with all the noise and air pollution!”), they all stayed a long distance away from the Cotton Stainer Bugs. This could possibly be attributed to the fact that the bugs let out a strange odour, when disturbed, thereby keeping their predators at bay.



The Cotton Stainer Bugs are pests that often feed on cotton. When the cotton is harvested, often the insect gets crushed along with the cotton, leaving a red stain, which cannot be removed, giving them their unique common name. Watch out for them in your garden, or better still, pick them up in your hand, and experience their foul smell for yourself !

Sanjay Sondhi is a Dehradun based naturalist. Feedback on this column is welcome at doonwatch@gmail.com

Making a difference: Diwali has come and gone. I hope you did your bit to reduce noise and air pollution. The International Day for Climate Action is on 24 Th. October, only a few days away. I hope you have picked your action to make a difference to reduce global warming-at school, at home, work or even the neighbourhood.

Photograph caption: Cotton Stainer Bugs on *Bhindi*

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