

Mantids

This month I decided to do something a bit different with my article. Hopefully, it will be a nice change of pace for us all. To cover the topic basics, mantids are considered beneficial insects because they are predators. They are known to be highly cannibalistic and generalists which means that they will eat other mantids and pretty much whatever they can get their raptorial legs on. While they can help reduce garden pests, it can also be that they consume insects that you don't want them to eat (i.e. pollinators). If you have mantids in your garden, try to conserve them, but I would not encourage you to release large numbers of them into your yard.



Now with that out of the way, I can move on to the *real* topic that I want to explore. What do you call a green to grey to brown colored insect with large eyes and short antennae on a triangular shaped head that has raptorial front legs? Is it a mantid or mantis? Is it preying or praying? I have wondered this many times as I have presented about these insects over the years, so I decided to dig in and try to figure out what is correct and where the names came from.

First stop for me was to look up the etymology (that's E-T-Y-M-O-L-O-G-Y and not E-N-T-O-M-O-L-O-G-Y) of mantis. I found the following from the online etymology dictionary:

mantis (n.)

1650s, "type of insect that holds its forelegs in a praying position" (especially the praying mantis, *Mantis religiosa*), Modern Latin, from Greek *mantis*, used of some sort of elongated insect with long forelimbs (*Theocritus*), literally "one who divines, a seer, prophet," from *mainesthai* "be inspired," related to *menos* "passion, spirit," from PIE **mnyo-*, suffixed form of root *men-* "to think," with derivatives referring to qualities and states of mind or thought (compare *mania* and *-mancy*).

The insects, which live in temperate and tropical regions worldwide, are so called for its way of holding the enlarged forelimbs as if in prayer. The mantis shrimp (by 1853; earlier sea-mantis, 1690s) is so called for its resemblance to the insect.

So that seems to be one vote for mantis instead of mantid. That led me to my next stop which was the Entomological Society of America's (ESA) website, and more specifically, their common name database. ESA has a committee of people who oversee the common names of insects and other arthropods. These names are considered to be "official" common names within the scientific community, although in scientific terms, you should always go with scientific names and not rely on common names as common names can change quite drastically depending upon where you live.

After perusing the ESA common name database, I found that *Mantis* was used to refer to a specific genus of Mantodea (the order in which these insects are placed) and that all listed common names consisted of the use of mantid. For example, the commonly named European mantid is *Mantis religiosa* while the commonly named Carolina mantid is *Stagmomantis carolina*. This leads me to the conclusion that **mantid** would be more encompassing of the group than **Mantis**. If you say *Mantis*, then you would be referring to specific insects within that particular genus and it would be inaccurate to call a Carolina mantid a *Mantis* since it isn't in that genus.

That left me to figure out praying vs. preying. Above, the etymology website refers to praying mantis since the insect has front legs that look as if they are in a position to pray. The ESA common name database does not mention anything about praying or preying mantids, but instead names them individually by their common names (Australian mantid, Chinese mantid, Burmeister mantid, etc.). After much searching, I was unable to come up with any reliable sources referring to preying mantids, but numerous references to praying mantids. I would make the assumption that the etymology of "mantis" at some point caused someone to tack on praying to the name. While preying would technically work for these insects since they are predators and prey on other animals, that does not seem to be the consensus of the people.

So summing up....it is PRAYING and not preying; MANTID and not mantis (unless you are referring to mantids that are specifically within the genus *Mantis*. Clear as mud?

For more information or help with identification, contact Wizzie Brown, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service Program Specialist at 512.854.9600. Check out my blog at www.urban-ipm.blogspot.com

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