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Casey Campbell | Gazette-Times
Lincoln School student Marika Lappe-Weiss shakes some of the ladybugs from her burlap bag onto one of the trees Tuesday at Holiday Tree Farms on Tuesday.

Ladybug liberators

By **THERESA HOGUE**
Gazette-Times reporter

Bugged by use of nature-harming chemicals, farm moves toward sustainable pest control

Chilly weather might have been keeping the 72,000 ladybugs at Holiday Tree Farms sedate, but it wasn't having the same effect on the 40 or so children waiting to help release them into the trees.

Instead, Tuesday morning there was so much bouncing and hopping and occasionally lunging at the burlap bags full of ladybugs, Lincoln School teachers had to be vigilant that no bugs were released early.

"Nope! Nope! Put them down!" teacher Patti Ball called out, snapping her fingers to get over-eager students away from the bags of bugs, each containing between 1,500 and 2,000 of the red-shelled insects. Meanwhile, a few more

intrepid bugs had already made their way out on their own, and one had found a new home on the coat-clad arm of Hailey Miller, 9. She danced around the patch of Christmas trees, displaying the bug to her friends.

Meanwhile, Mark Arkills, production manager at Holiday Tree Farms in Corvallis, was trying to keep the students' attention as he explained why they were about to release 72,000 ladybugs onto a nearby acre of Noble firs.

"Do you know what sustainable means?" he asked them. "We take care of our land and our people. We give back to our soil."

Arkills, who has a 9-year-old granddaughter who is obsessed with ladybugs, understood the children's excitement. He was pretty excited himself.

"We've observed (ladybugs) in the fields for years, but we've never done a release before," Arkills said. But last year, Holiday Tree Farms joined the Coalition of Environmentally Conscious Growers, which requires an independent audit of the farm, to establish that it utilizes sustainable farming practices, including biodiversity, soil and water conservation and healthy working conditions for staff.

"The whole world is going "green," it's a trend we're all seeing," Arkills said. "We've always known we were doing a good job taking care of our resources, but we have never been certified before."

Using predatory "good" insects like ladybugs is part of the farm's attempt to use integrated pest management, which relies less on chemicals and more on natural approaches, such as having ladybugs eat aphids and spider mites. When aphids feast, they secrete a chemical known as honeydew, that collects on the Christmas tree needles and damages them.

"It will turn black and discolor the foliage, and we can't harvest the trees," Arkills said.

Because ladybugs love to eat aphids, and can consume 5,000 in their lifetime, they're a great natural way to limit the population, and thus the damage to the trees. The Coalition of Environmentally Conscious Growers provided locally raised ladybugs to Holiday Tree Farms and other local farms Tuesday as a way to introduce school kids to the idea of integrated pest management.

When the Lincoln students were finally allowed to grab their own bag of ladybugs, they quickly rushed out into the field of trees, pulling open the strings and dumping ladybugs out. Each child had his or her own approach to ladybug distribution.

Elisia Rose, 10, began by placing each individual ladybug on its own branch with her fingertips, but soon realized that with 2,000 bugs in her bag, it was going to be a long morning.

"Casey, look inside your bag!" she called to her friend Casey Lowrey, 11.

"I know," Casey replied. "There are like a million of them!"

Casey was sprinkling her bag of ladybugs liberally on every tree she passed.

"It's like a salt shaker," she said, as she tried to propel the stubborn and lethargic bugs out of the bag with vigorous shakes.

Elisia started following Casey's lead and shook her own bag out, but stooped to pick up any ladybugs that had fallen on the ground, and put them back on the trees. Nearby her, Devyn Manley, 9, was examining a tree to see how the ladybugs were taking to it. He saw one perched on the very top branch and pointed at it excitedly.

"Look, he's king of the world!" he shouted.

Meanwhile, 8-year-old Kelsey Rock had discovered the one downside of ladybugs.

"The only reason I don't like ladybugs is they tickle me," she said a little mournfully. "I'm really ticklish."



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