



Ghoulies and Ghosties

As we all awaited the arrival of the big nor'easter, it felt as if the earth itself was holding its breath, waiting, too. The air was ominously still, and the cloud cover was that murky leaden color more commonly seen closer to winter. But for the lingering warmth, it might have been much later in the year. In fact, the uneasily brooding sky made for a straight-from-Hollywood Halloween night.

If you love dress-up and fantasy, there's no better time of year than Halloween. Some of us prefer to be princesses or superheroes; others are pirates or vampires. But for those who yearn to be monsters, there's a wealth of inspiration right outside your back door. Mother Nature revels in creating creatures that rival anything out of a sci-fi movie. Some merely look terrifying; others are the real deal. Imagine an all-pest costume party:

Your average vampire has nothing on the aptly-named assassin bug, with hundreds of species around the world. They grab their prey, sink in their fangs, and inject a venom that dissolves the victim's tissues, the better to suck it dry. "Fangs" isn't technically correct: the actual apparatus is a three-segmented beak that conveniently folds away after use. I imagine one built out of wire hangers and, perhaps, a pair of garden shears.

Prefer zombies? How about a tomato hornworm? Not a worm but a caterpillar, with a bright green body up to four inches long. If it survives long enough it will become one of several species of moths, possibly the ethereal luna moth—and what a lovely costume that would be! First, though, it must evade armies of parasitic wasps, whose idea of childcare is to populate the caterpillar body with dozens of eggs which, upon hatching, slowly consume the host. If you ever see a big green caterpillar studded with tiny white grains of 'rice,' you're looking at the walking dead.

Bloodthirsty murder hornets, which, fortunately, are still pretty much confined to the Pacific Northwest, wear Halloween colors of yellow, black, and brown, with a large orange head reminiscent of a jack-o-lantern. Make yours from a big pumpkin. Murder hornets feast on honeybees, and can do terrible damage to grapevines, so no wine at this party.

If you're handy with paper-mache, try outfitting yourself in the hard-shelled beetle bodies of stink bugs or Asian ladybugs. The shield-shaped marmorated stink bug ("marmorated" is a fancy word describing its mottled or marbled brownish exterior) is a serious crop pest. The Asian lady bug or beetle somewhat resembles our native ladybugs, but is oval and dull orange instead of a rounded bright red, with a pronounced "M" mark behind its head. Both stink bugs and Asian lady beetles emit a foul chemical smell when threatened or crushed, making them unappetizing to many birds and small mammals that would otherwise be their natural predators. Both have the highly undesirable habit of coming indoors for the winter. Every fall, right around Halloween, there will be a day when actual clouds of lady beetles land on my house and find their way in through the tiniest crevices. They'll mostly hide out until spring, when the first warm day will find them swarming the south- and west-facing windows. I vacuum them up and throw away the bag, lest they crawl out. Ugh.

No garden pest party would be complete without crazy jumping worms and hammerhead worms. The jumpers are big, slightly iridescent, with a wide white collar band and frenzied dance moves. Hammerheads are longer, skinnier, and unsegmented, often with a lengthwise stripe, and the distinctive head shape you thought was only found on sharks. Jumpers strip the soil of nutrients. Hammerheads are carnivores. As yet we have no means of controlling either.

Of course, the party wouldn't be complete without the most recent villain, the spotted lantern fly (not actually a fly). It only arrived here about a dozen years ago, but it's already damaging ornamental and food crops. It pierces the plant and sucks out sap, causing the leaves to wilt and die off. At the same time, it excretes a sweet 'honeydew,' which attracts other insect pests and encourages mold. It's bad news, but what a striking costume it would make! Imagine wearing outer wings of diaphanous grey-brown, which, when lifted, reveal cherry-red inner wings dotted with black. Even the larval stages are striking, first black with white polka dots, later red and black.

Like stink bugs and Asian lady beetles, they taste bad, so birds avoid them. Fortunately, though, their odor is acquired rather than innate. Their favorite food is the tree of heaven, ailanthus altissima, which looks like sumac but has a nasty smell if you break or crush the stem. Remove the trees, and the lantern flies become more palatable. Scientists hope that a concentrated effort to remove the trees will gradually bring the lantern fly population into balance. But they'll be around for at least a few more Halloweens.

Trick or treat!