

Pay close attention to what you discard. You may accidentally be getting rid of something you shouldn't.

Last week I wrote about five activities a gardener should accomplish in his or her landscape before winter arrives. I titled one of those activities, *Cutting-back and Cleaning-up*.

For the last month or two, our vegetable garden was looking rag-tag. I hate to admit it, but it was becoming an embarrassment. Most of the vegetation was in serious decline and weeds were taking over. As a result, just days ago, Rita and I decided to *cut-back and clean-up* the vegetable garden. We first harvested all the remaining produce including beets, potatoes, tomatoes and carrots. The balance of the spent vegetation was discarded in the landfill.



Encircling the perimeter of our vegetable garden was a row of zinnia flowers, a practice I learned long ago from my mother. Not only did these plants make our garden more attractive; they also served as a great source of cut flowers throughout the summer months. However, it was time they were removed. While pulling out these exhausted plants, I noticed, attached to one of the stems, an alien-looking thing. I carefully snipped it free and set it aside. Next we began cutting-back and cleaning-up the

tomatoes. While removing the tomato cages, we discovered two more of these strange anomalies. Each was securely attached to the metal. Rather than destroy them, I grabbed a pair of wire cutters and cut them free. When we finished cleaning the garden, my pickup was filled with refuse vegetation destined for the landfill. At that moment I thought, "How many more might we be discarding?"

The bizarre, weird-looking objects we found in our garden were oothecae. Ootheca is the scientific name given for an egg case created by an assortment of insect species. In this case, the oothecae we found were those of a praying mantis. Each appeared about the size of a golf ball and resembled a piece of Styrofoam.

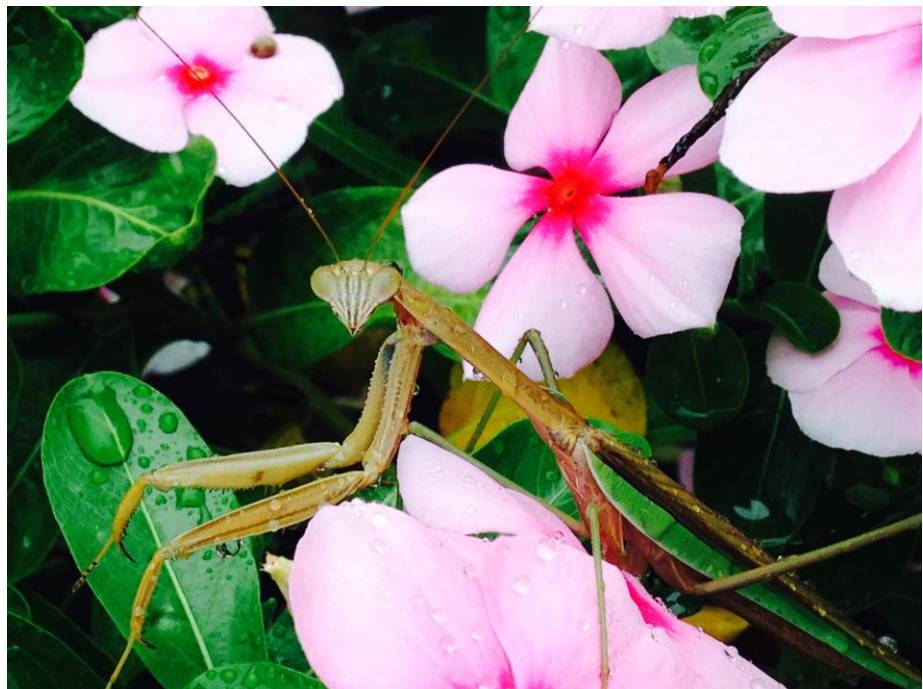
You might recall that on January 10, 2015, I wrote about an ootheca I had discovered attached to our magnolia tree. In that article I stated that I was tempted to take the egg case indoors for observation. Rather, I left it attached to the twig throughout the winter. Prior to that time, I do not recall seeing many mantis egg cases in our yard. It is now my thinking that perhaps by allowing that egg case to remain in

our yard and hatch out, these newly discovered egg cases were created by offspring of that hatch.

We gave one of the oothecas to one of Rita's students who has been eagerly researching praying mantises. The other two, I attached to shrubbery in our yard. Hopefully, by next spring, we will have many, many more praying mantises.

Although I'm not totally positive, I'm guessing the species of mantis egg cases we recently discovered were from *Tenodera sinensis*, more commonly called the Chinese mantis — one of twenty plus species found in North America. This particular species was introduced to the United States more than a century ago.

Throughout the summer, I observed a number of these beautiful, three-to-four inch long, greenish/brown mantises. Attached is a photo I recently took of one of these intriguing creatures. At the time, I was watering a border of periwinkle flowers. As you can see from the photo, it appears displeased with me because I got it wet. I now have a printed copy displayed on my office wall. I've titled it, *Aliens Walk Among Us*.



Most people realize that praying mantises are beneficial insects. They are known to do what they do best, and that is, eat other insects. Unfortunately, not being selective, they generally eat any insect, whether it is deemed good or bad. Furthermore, they are cannibalistic — capable of eating their own species. Very interesting creatures, don't you think?

I view my recent discoveries as good fortune. When *Cutting-back and Cleaning-up* your landscape, be on the lookout for oothecas. If found, please don't discard them with your garden refuse.