



This Bug's For You!

At this annual festival, you can get up close and personal with some of the fascinating insects with which we share our world.

by ELENA ACOBA

Bugs are fascinating. Just ask an entomologist. Or a kid.

Children and their adults are what has made the Arizona Insect Festival wildly popular over its seven-year history. The eighth edition will be held Oct. 21 at the University of Arizona.

The UA's Department of Entomology organizes the festival to display its research, collections and other activities to the public.

But, really, it's all about the fascination with arthropods — creatures that have no backbones, wear armor called an exoskeleton and have segmented bodies and jointed legs. That animal group includes insects, spiders, scorpions, shrimp, crabs, centipedes, millipedes and the extinct trilobites.

And it's children who seem to love them the most, says Kathleen Walker, who heads the event planning committee.

The festival naturally attracts curious children, says Walker, an assistant professor of entomology with interests in agricultural ecology and science learning.

She believes kids haven't adopted the "ick factor" surrounding bugs that many adults have. So they're willing to learn about them by getting up close and personal.

"We're dealing with kids, who really need to touch things, and be with real things," she says. "What's also nice is when they're there, they're with their parents, who have different ways of learning."

So while the little ones are cradling hissing cockroaches in the Cockroach Cuddle Corner, parents are reading or chatting with an expert about the insect.

It's a good combination to get children excited about science. "A learning experience that a child shares with an important adult has a greater impact on long-term learning," Walker says. "If kids are sharing a

discovery with their parents, that can trigger a lifetime appreciation of sciences."

There are plenty of shared experiences at the festival. Some two dozen booths are set up to highlight activities by researchers in the entomology department and other areas of the university, as well as by community organizations such as Tohono Chul Park, the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum and Saguaro National Park.

Besides the Cockroach Cuddle Corner, visitors can pet caterpillars, stick their hands into a box of non-biting male mosquitoes, examine butterfly specimens and look at bug brains.

The adventurous can taste cricket cookies that Walker bakes or mealworm tacos by her husband, UA entomology professor Yves Carriere. The creative can build a real or fantastical arthropod using craft materials and participate in writing and hearing odes to bugs. The curious can approach graduate students to get answers about arthropods or attend short, lively faculty talks to learn the latest developments. Last year the talks included



2018 Arizona Insect Festival

OCT. 21, 10 A.M.-3 P.M.

Environmental and Natural Resources 2 Building at the University of Arizona

Admission: Free

For more information:
621-1941,
www.arizonainsectfestival.com



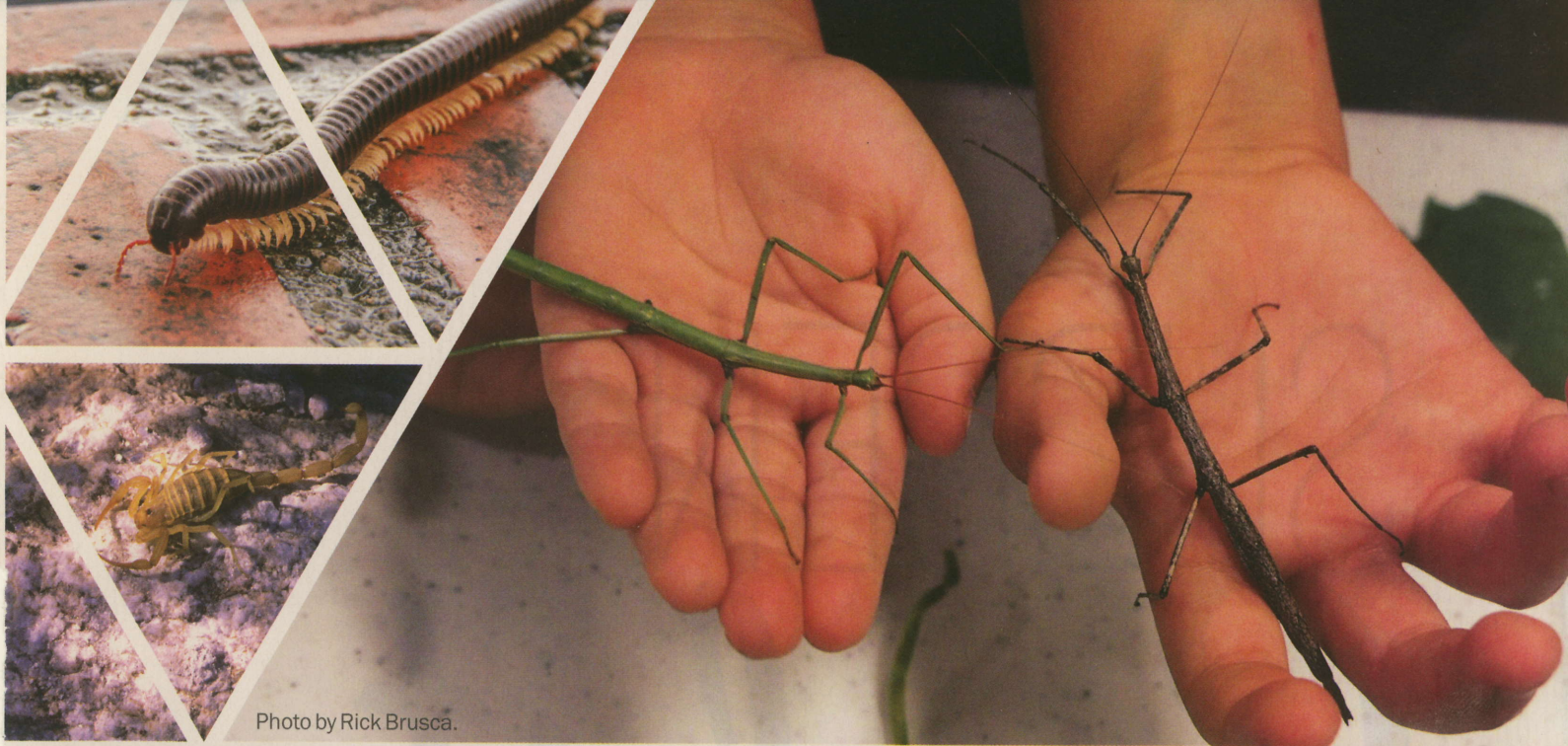


Photo by Rick Brusca.



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How to Bug a Bug

In an event where touching arthropods is a main attraction, the stars of the Arizona Insect Festival can get pretty stressed out. Thank goodness there are entomologists who can read the signs.

Assistant professor Kathleen Walker, for instance, says she can tell when it's time to put her cockroaches down for a nap: "When they start hissing or pretending they're dead."

Tired scorpions and vinegaroons start to arch their tails and hold up their pincers in a defensive position, she says.

Scorpions can die from stress. Tarantulas are known to strike out when they get "cranky," says Walker. "They can bite. It's not dangerous, but it's not nice."

why bugs sting, what parasites reveal about pest control in agriculture and how bugs use chemicals for defense.

The science café and the faculty talks are fairly new — a step toward adding some higher-level science into the festival.

"We had this parade of professors giving outreach talks, interpreting their science in a focused format," says Wendy Moore, associate entomology professor. "People who came were raving about it and the faculty loved it."

It was Moore, who also is the curator of the UA Insect Collection, that got the festival started. Armed with a grant that required she create an outreach project, Moore had developed a program about beetles that she presented at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum.

"My department head (Bruce Tabashnik) came to it and he loved it," she recalls. "He said, 'Wendy, we have to bring this to the University of Arizona and get the entire department in it.'"

The department of about 20 faculty answered the call. The Arizona Insect

Festival made its debut in fall 2010 on the UA Mall.

"It was wildly successful for the public," she says, "and it was a feel-good thing that we did with the department."

The festival has expanded ever since, first outgrowing the UA Student Union ballroom, then taking up the ground floor of the Environment and Natural Resources 2 building. This year it's spreading onto the second floor of ENR2 to accommodate music entertainment, merchandise sellers and non-insect food vendors.

Walker admits she doesn't know how much longer the festival will last.

"We have this discussion each year — are we going to do it again? — and we say, 'Yes, we have to do it,'" she says. "It's so good."

The department needs funding sources and a talented coordinator to keep it together after this year. Walker is optimistic. "I have a feeling it will keep going," she says.

"It's just something people like and, on our side, we're enjoying it." **TL**

Here are examples of the insects you'll see at the annual Arizona Insect Festival.