By Kylee Baumlee

One of the concerns about having such a warm winter last year was what effect it would have on the insect population. It's generally thought that a warm winter won't kill all the bugs it needs to. Every ecosystem has its balance and when things are shaken up by such things as temperature, you have to wonder if there will be changes in other parts of the whole.

I'm no scientist, but I like to think my brain works logically (most of the time). So my initial response to this bug thing was to say that even if many of the bad bugs weren't wiped out by the usual prolonged cold temperatures of a typical winter, neither would their natural enemies. Balance would remain, right?

I don't know what your personal experience in your garden was, but here's mine: I had fewer bugs. That's right. Fewer. In particular, the Japanese beetle numbers were down. For years now, I've kept a running tally of just how many Japanese beetles I've caught and destroyed throughout the summer.

I hand pick them off of their favorite haunts – the 'Morning Magic' climbing rose and the pink hybrid tea rose, 'Memorial Day'. These are the only plants I find them on, with an occasional one or two found on the daylily 'Big Smile.'

In my worst year, 2009, I found over 300 Japanese beetles in the garden. This year, only 33 TOTAL. Since my chickens find these to be a delicious treat, they were disappointed when I walked by their run with no treat, time and time again.

Was this because of the warmer winter? I have my doubts and like to think it's because I've been diligent each year in removing them so there are fewer to reproduce for the next year. I also give the grubs I find when digging in the garden to the chickens, so those never have a chance to grow up to be beetles either.

As far as other insects go, the dry summer reduced the mosquito population to almost non-existent. They increased this fall as we got the badly needed rains, but not to unbearable amounts. I can remember some summers when they were so bad I couldn't even work outside in the middle of the day without being swarmed by them.

Our garden is a Certified Monarch Waystation and we grow several types of milkweed so that the monarchs have another place to lay eggs. Milkweed (Asclepias sp.) plants are the only things that monarch caterpillars eat, and with much of that habitat disappearing, so are the monarchs.

I love the monarch and its miraculous migration story, so I want to do my part to help increase their populations. They were conspicuously missing in the first part of summer, but returned in the second half, although I never found a single chrysalis in my garden this year.

I didn't have any problems with squash vine borer, and the flea beetles that usually pepper the foliage of many plants with tiny holes that look like they got hit with buckshot were minimal, too. I had the usual number of tobacco hornworms on the tomatoes (again, chicken treats!) and the katydid nymphs took their toll on the roses in similar fashion as years before. The spotted cucumber beetles were everywhere, but no more than usual and the same goes for cabbage loopers.

One of the most disgusting insects in my garden is the earwig. It can cause some damage to flowers, but I had fewer of those this year, too. If I noticed an increase in any unwanted garden pests, it was the slugs. I never actually saw too many, but my hostas suffered damage from them more this year than in any of the years prior.

This has been a record-setting weather year, to be sure, but I don't know that it had much effect on the insects. At least not from my observation and perspective as a home gardener. Your experience may have been different and I'd love to hear about it.

Read more at Kylee's blog, Our Little Acre, at www.ourlittleacre.com and on Facebook at www.facebook.com/OurLittleAcre. Contact her at PauldingProgressGardener@gmail.com.