

Weaver ants, weaver ants.... weave, weave, weave ...and save our mangos, guavas, lemons.....

Meet the queen, Ms. *Oecophylla longinoda*, her workers and children. They live high on tree canopies in the far-away savanna ecosystems and rainforests of sub-Saharan Africa. They are not arboreal but make nests in trees stitching many leaves together using the silk exuded from their larvae. A similarly large number of nests makes up their colony between which they tend to enjoy a stroll or a faster stride. Yes, they are the weaver ants of tropical Africa and they have a very closely related cousin (*O. smaragdina*) living in the south and south-east Asian countries.

But, that is not just the reason we should be happy to meet the queen and her kids. Their ecological role is immense in horticultural landscapes of sub-Saharan Africa. They help to deliver the juicy and tangy fruits on our plate. But, the immediate question pops up, how a tiny creature can be such a philanthropist?

The answer might not be too apparent and linear, but these predator ants play a crucial role in maintaining the food chain.

They are great enemies of fruit flies that voraciously feed on many African fruits, e.g., mangos, cashews, citrus, guava, and many more. The ants release an array of semiochemicals that deter insect herbivores, particularly tephritid female fruit flies. Not merely that, these weaver ants are also one of the ablest predators of arthropods in perennial tropical tree crops.

Therefore, menacing populations of fruit flies can be biologically controlled by generalist predators like *Oecophylla* species, naturally and without applying any harmful chemical killers. It also compels us to fathom how biodiversity is important to produce our food and in saving our food systems.



Source: Vayssières, J.F., Offenber, J., Sinzogan, A., Adandonon, A., Wargui, R., Anato, F., Houngbo, H.Y., Ouagoussounon, I., Diamé, L., Quilici, S. and Rey, J.Y., 2016. The use of weaver ants in the management of fruit flies in Africa. In *Fruit Fly Research and Development in Africa-Towards a Sustainable Management Strategy to Improve Horticulture* (pp. 389-434). Springer, Cham.

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