

Puc-boong

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“*Swamp Cabbage*” doesn’t have the same appeal as the Thai (ผักบุ้ง), and neither does the English “*Stir-fried Water Spinach*”. The dish is excellent with rice ... if we stick to the Thai name.



The plant is a convolvulus (a weed in normal circumstances) that grows in water, which is good for setting up a monoculture.



Puc-boong in a pot at the house.

A fast growing leafy plant that's good for us to eat, a plant with its roots in water, will have lots of sugary sap and be favoured by sap-sucking insects. The recently planted pot in the image above has attracted a range of bugs that we've seen occasionally before, but as visitors not residents. Meaning they've been seen occasionally in ones and twos, not as individuals or groups that stayed on the same stems and leaves for weeks.

Bugs, beetles and spiders

Coreidae: *Physomerus grossipe* (20 mm) a leaf-footed bug commonly called a "Sweet Potato bug".



The long spiked mouth part is a pointed tube that is stuck into stems to suck sap from the plant. Leaf-footed bugs have extensions on the hind legs or, like this one, swellings that make them look strong and slightly intimidating, but they are docile and pose no threat to us or other insects. They spend their lives clambering slowly around the plants sucking sap.

They fly only when disturbed with a slightly clumsy whirring flight with flashes of bright red under the wing covers.



A larger female is on the right. We found a dozen of these on the small collection of plants in the pot at the same time, but most of them suddenly disappeared, probably taken by birds.

Coreidae: *Dalader* sp.



A second species of leaf-footed bug, smaller at 14 mm, are found on the plants in lower numbers, two or three at a time.

Like the previous species they are mating and laying eggs, settling in for the long haul.



A pair: the female is on the right.

Lygaeidae: *Graptostethus servus*



A widely distributed ground bug. We had not seen this species at the house before we planted the Puc-boong. They seem to prefer this plant and may now become regulars.

Tortoise beetles

Cassidinae: *Cassida circumdata*



Remarkable little beetles, (5 mm), with extended transparent elytra and a shield over the head that makes them resemble a tiny turtle. They sit quietly on leaves, eat a small hole and move on. These beetles are commonly found on ground convolvulus of this and other spices and on sweet potato leaves. They fly if disturbed but soon return to the same plant. Adult beetles, often feed and mate on the plant they were hatched on.

Turtle beetles feed on the upper surface of leaves and are exposed targets for predators and parasites which tends to control their numbers. The nymphs, (right) are spiny, typical of the genus.



Cassidinae: *Lacoptera nepalensis*



A little larger at 8 mm than the species above and found less often, but like its relatives they eat holes in leaves as nymphs and adults.

The common leaf beetle

Holes in the leaves are also due to this fellow.



Golden leaf beetles fly in, eat holes, and fly out. They don't stay put like the tortoise beetles, and are found at times on many other plants.

Sweet potato weevil

Cylas formicarius (9-11 mm)



As the name suggests this weevil looks something like an ant running about on leaves at dusk and in the early evening.

The preferred host plant for which it's named is the sweet potato, but it also inhabits many species of morning glory (*Convolvulus*) and has arrived on our Puc-boong.

The adults feed on buds, leaves, and stems of the *Convolvulus*. So far we have only two or three if these that we see most days when we look for them. Before we planted the Puc-boong we had seen them at a property a hundred metres down the road on sweet potato, but not in our yard.

The adults do little real damage but the larvae drill holes in the stems and the tubers of the sweet potato and are considered a major pest.

This is a high rainfall area with a six-month wet season and our Puc-boong grows very fast. We don't expect the weevils to do much damage, but we'll find out over time.

Leaf-mining beetle

Oncocephala sp.

These little (4-5 mm) beetles walk quietly over leaves and do little damage. The larvae are leaf miners that spend their time in the leaves of the plants eating tunnels that weaken it.

Many leaf miners are fly larvae, but a small number of the leaf beetles (4%) also have leaf mining larvae.



Leaf-miner in action



This backlit image, taken in our garden shows the effect of the leaf mining beetle nymph actively enlarging its protective tunnel. Head end left. Frass (insect poo) is seen as irregular dark balls upper right and in the digestive tract of the nymph.

Predators

Herbivores attract carnivores. Apart from birds we find two species of spider that have the status of frequent visitors. We do not yet have resident predators.

Oxyopidae: an unidentified species of Lynx spider with distinctive black legs. We find more of these on the Puc-boong than elsewhere in the garden. They roam over leaves during daylight hours like a cat.



Salticidae: A small (5 mm) distinctive jumping spider.



We had seen this species only once before we found it on the Puc-boong. We are watching to see if it becomes a resident.