



## Dr. May Berenbaum

### *Queen Bee*

Want to know what's bugging the planet? Dr. May Berenbaum is the person you want to ask.

As head of the Department of Entomology at the University of Illinois and the nation's leading expert on "Colony Collapse Disorder," Berenbaum has testified before Congress on the potential disruption of the world's food network because of the mysterious and rapid decline in honeybees. Without honeybees, the natural pollination of flowering plants and food is derailed, threatening entire crops and what is available in our grocery stores.

Bees are to thank for putting one-third of everything we eat on our tables. For humans, they are the most important pollinators on Earth. In the U.S. alone, they pollinate 130 crops a year and their services are worth \$15 billion.

Berenbaum told *Smithsonian Magazine* that Colony Collapse Disorder among honeybees is "a crisis on top of a crisis." It's not about the honey, she explains. "Over three-quarters of flowering plants—the foundations for most terrestrial food chains—depend on honeybees and other animal pollinators. Yet we know pathetically little about most of them."

With nearly 30 years in research at the University of Illinois, Berenbaum's knowledge of the insect world goes far beyond honeybees. A graduate of Yale University, she later received her Ph.D. in ecology and evolutionary biology from Cornell University. Devoted to teaching and fostering science literacy, Berenbaum was the recipient of the 1996 Entomological Society of America's Distinguished Teaching Award.

There is nothing dry or academic about Berenbaum's approach to explaining the impact of the insect world to our lives. According to *The Boston Globe*, "With masterful storytelling and flashes of wry humor, Berenbaum explores the role of insects in the human economy and in the disasters of war, and as the unseen, though vital, architects of our ecosystem." *Science Magazine* may have said it best: "There is no better guide to the world of insects than Berenbaum whose writing is as readable as a good novel and who has a quirky sense of humor all her own."

It's her often-humorous approach to the serious-sounding field of entomology that sets Berenbaum apart. She has written four books: *Bugs in the System: Insects and Their Impact on Human Affairs*; *Buzzwords: A Scientist Muses on Sex, Bugs and Rock 'n' Roll*; *99 Gnats, Nits and Nibblers*; and *99 More Maggots, Mites and Munchers*.

She has gained fame as the organizer of the Insect Fear Festival at the University of Illinois, an annual celebration of Hollywood's insect excesses. She even has had a character in the X-Files named after her, Dr. Bambi Berenbaum, a famous entomologist and love-interest of Agent Mulder.

When it comes to the fascinating world of insects and their relationship to human life, Berenbaum doesn't mind being a real pest.