Hollywood knows that bugs make good box office.

Last fall, two movies starring insects were released, but leading bug experts say this isn’t surprising.

Just as three years ago, every hip kid in elementary school knew the difference between a Tyrannosaurus and a Brontosaurus, this year’s budding naturalists will quickly correct you if you mistake an ant for an arachnid, says Tom Turpin, professor of entomology at Purdue University.

“Insects are the new dinosaurs for kids,” he says. “Already, museums around the country have special insect exhibits and bug festivals, so they’re pretty popular now. But these movies are going to just make them even bigger.”

May Berenbaum, head of the Department of Entomology at the University of Illinois—and the nation’s top expert on insects in films—says that rather than replace dinosaurs, kids will find room to enjoy both bugs and dinos.

“Dinosaurs are extinct—that’s part of their appeal,” she says. “Insects are all too real. What other kind of wild animal can you see without leaving home?”

DreamWorks Studios released the movie “Antz,” which starred Z, a whiny ant voiced by Woody Allen, who complains to his therapist that he was ignored by his parents, pointing out that he was the “middle child in a family of five million.”

The latest Hollywood effort, “A Bug’s Life,” which was produced by Disney and Pixar, is a loose retelling of Aesop’s fable “The Ant and the Grasshopper.” This movie contains a menagerie of creepy-crawlies, including pillbugs, a chubby caterpillar and a male ladybug who has “issues.”

Turpin says that bug movies aren’t a new invention by Hollywood.

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Berenbaum says that insects as good guys in movies aren’t all that new, either. “There’s actually a rich tradition of good-guy insects that people tend to forget about,” she says. “Jiminy Cricket probably started it off in 1940 with ‘Pinocchio.’”

However, in recent years, insects have been portrayed as evil aliens in a host of movies. For example, in “Starship Troopers,” giant arthropods try to take over Earth; in “Men in Black,” giant insects threaten to take over Earth until they are overwhelmed by the cool aura projected by Will Smith and Tommy Lee Jones.

Turpin says insects are a natural choice to play the alien villains in these movies. “The look is the key,” he says. “They’re totally different from us. They have an exoskeleton. They’re robotic in the way they think; they’re different in all of their behaviors. A dog can smile at you and lick you with its tongue, but there’s no such connection with insects. They’re as different from humans as a creature can be.”

Turpin added that moviegoers are predisposed to root against any character in a movie that is fashioned after an insect. “We hate insects anyway, so it’s very easy to make them the protagonist in a movie,” he says.

One staple of the horror genre is the building-sized giant insect-like creature, such as the monsters Will Smith vaporized in “Men in Black.” This monster is a staple of alien movies and cheesy genetic-experiment-gone-awry B-flicks, but Turpin says that we have nothing to fear when it comes to giant insects.

“Technically, they can’t become larger than they are because of their exoskeleton. They can’t breathe as easily; the diffusion system that insects use to distribute oxygen through their bodies would work; and they would suffocate. Those two things prevent insects from becoming the size of elephants. Instead, they try to overcome us with numbers. That’s how they battle us for supremacy on this planet.”

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Survival strategies

Purdue helps pork producers weather the storm

Chris Sigurdson

Overall, Indiana farmers are going to take a pay cut this year, says David Petritz, agriculture and natural resources program leader for the Purdue Cooperative Extension Service. “Net farm income in Indiana will be down 50 percent this year.”

For starters, Hoosier pork producers will be fortunate if they only lose $300 million. And Indiana will be lucky if it only loses 25 percent of its pork producers.

A huge supply of hogs and repressed Asian economies conspired to send pork prices plunging. Slaughter bottlenecks and a slow response at the retail level kept them down. Some hog markets paid less than $8 for a whole hog, which is ludicrous when a slab of ribs cost more.

A great crop year, globally, kept corn, wheat and soybean prices low, too. Government loan deficiency payments and Freedom-to-Farm transition payments provided much of what profit there was for U.S. grain farmers last year.

Always risky, farming seemed to get a whole lot tougher, Petritz says.

Purdue agricultural economist Chris Hurt says hog prices should approach break-even by summer, with prices in the high $30s to $40, with fall prices moving to the lower $40s. Still, he estimates, it may take until the end of 2000 before pork producers recover the equity loss they will accumulate from fall ‘98 through spring ’99.

That $300 million loss in revenue and a devaluation of pork holdings will ripple through rural economies, Petritz says. Schools and local governments will feel the pinch of lower tax receipts.

To help, Purdue Extension held a series of satellite video conferences that covered cost containment tactics, financial strategies and economic outlook for Hoosier pork producers. The programs, one airing in December with a follow-up in January, were well-received. Pork producer Levi Huffman, Buck Creek, Ind., called the program, “One of the most interesting and most informational video conferences that I have seen.”

Purdue Dean of Agriculture Victor Lechtenberg joined Lt. Gov. Joseph Kernan as co-chair of a Pork Crisis team that looked into industry concentration and contracting issues, lender programs, pseudorabies-infected herd buy outs, and financial assistance programs. The committee’s mission since has been expanded to include all of production agriculture.

Purdue Extension also held a series of 18 meetings across the state to help farm families fine tune their operations, farm businesses and family finances. The “Charting a Course for the Family Farm” meetings reached more than 600 farmers. An accompanying set of leaflets, with information on cutting crop production costs, working with lenders, family communication and analyzing financial status, have been widely distributed to all county offices.

“While agriculture overall may look pretty strong, some individual farms have been badly hit,” Lechtenberg says. “Our job has been to help them find the information and resources they need to make decisions. At the same time, there are fundamental questions about industry structure and operations that need to be examined.”

In a further show of support for colleagues caught in a crunch, the Purdue Agriculture Alumni Association reversed a 50-year tradition at its annual Fish Fry by substituting pork for the usual perch. Response was so positive that the donor, Indiana Packers Co., has pledged next year’s pork as well.