

Butterfly Summer

By Susan Camp

All summer our garden has been filled with a dizzying array of butterflies and moths, not to mention bees and fly pollinators, thanks to our selection of many native plants. There is, of course, the matter of the butterfly bushes (*Buddleia* spp.) we planted last fall without checking them out for invasiveness, but one of the plants is a sterile variety and the others we watch closely so we can remove spent blossoms before they go to seed.

The great thing about having so many varieties of butterflies visit the garden is that we can watch them up close and take pictures to help us identify them. Smartphones are a great invention; I love the handiness of the camera. Every day I hang out in the garden, just waiting for the right butterfly or bee at the right moment. I do a little weeding, a little watering, and a little waiting.

The greatest reward is how much we are learning about the winged wildlife feeding off the plants. This summer's frequent visitors include the native eastern tiger swallowtail (*Papilio glaucus*), zebra swallowtail (*Eurytides marcellus*), and black swallowtail (*Papilio polyxenes*), whose picture I have yet to capture. The swallowtails include 560 colorful species, many of which live in the tropics and have long tails. The tiger swallowtail feeds on tulip poplar, black cherry, birch, and linden leaves and the zebra swallowtail prefers pawpaw, all of which we have in our woods. The black swallowtail feeds on plants in the North American carrot family, including cultivated and wild carrot (Queen Anne's Lace). Douglas W. Tallamy in "Bringing Nature Home" (2007) notes that the black swallowtail has adapted to eating non-native dill and parsley, both of which belong to the carrot family and so provide the nutritive chemicals that the caterpillars can digest. Black swallowtails also will feed on fennel and rue.

The common buckeye (*Junonia coenia*) was a new butterfly to me. Its home range is farther south, but we were happy to see it in the garden last week, and hope more of these lovely creatures find their way to our flowers. As fellow Gloucester Master Gardener Belinda Hicks said when she saw its picture, "There's nothing common about that beauty." We hope many of its relatives will visit the garden. The buckeye likes open fields, sand dunes, and scrubby terrain. The caterpillars feed on toadflax (*Linaria canadensis*), false foxglove (*Gerardia pedicularia*), ruellia (*ruellia caroliniensis*), and similar plants, none of which I have identified on the property, but do grow in our region.

Although we planted swamp milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*), common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*), and butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), with its bright orange blossoms, we have as yet to see the first appearance of a monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*). Even if a monarch doesn't show up, at least eleven other species of butterfly lay their eggs on *Asclepias* spp., according to Tallamy.

We grow catmint, Joe Pye weed, yellow and blue false indigo, threadleaf coreopsis, beebalm, phlox, and wild columbine. All are good nectar sources and are visited daily by many varieties of butterflies and moths.

This year I planted Italian flat leaf parsley, bronze fennel, and dill to share with the caterpillars. Needless to say, there is little left of those lush, fragrant herbs, but it is worth the loss to watch the caterpillars develop, which leads to a sobering question: how many of those colorful eating machines will spin a chrysalis and emerge as an enchanting butterfly next spring? The fact is that many species of fat, juicy butterfly and moth larvae provide food for birds, reptiles, and small mammals a little further up the food chain. Without the caterpillars, many other creatures wouldn't have enough to eat. A part of me wants every black swallowtail caterpillar to survive and metamorphose into a shimmering, winged beauty, but the other part knows that most of the larvae will end up as lunch.

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