

Summer Butterfly Gardening

Marianne Duvall

Sunday, July 7, 2002

Last Saturday, while I was working, a seven year old boy and his mother paid me a visit. They were on a mission. They wanted to release a butterfly that they had raised from a caterpillar I had given Ian about three weeks earlier. Inside Ian's small plastic cage an Eastern Black Swallowtail butterfly lay on the bottom, its empty chrysalis on the opposite wall. Ian was eager to explain how he "grew" the caterpillar. "Ian followed your care instructions," his mother proudly noted. He put fresh stalks of organically grown parsley - pesticide free- inside the larva's cage. He kept the cage clean by removing paper towels from the bottom of the cage that had collected the caterpillar's droppings, called frass.

Ian's caterpillar ate and grew. After several days it stopped feeding and made its way up to the top of the cage and formed its chrysalis. 'Did you watch it 'morph'?' I asked. His big blue eyes became bigger. 'Yes!' he smiled. Then he told me an accident happened after the chrysalis had fully formed. The chrysalis was dislodged from the ceiling and fell to the floor. Ian remembered the delicate state this stage of cycle was. He was concerned the accident would disrupt the further development of the butterfly. Could this event hurt his insect?

Eventually the butterfly emerged. Ian pointed out a missing hind wing on the butterfly. "Was this the result of the accident?" Ian asked. The butterfly was dry and needed to be released. "Sometimes accidents happen," was all I could say. Now the four of us were on our way to the butterfly garden. Ian wanted his butterfly 'freed' there.

We chose a salvia, a favored butterfly nectar flower, close to Ian's eye level. I told him to stick his finger inside the cage and let the butterfly crawl onto his finger. He could then draw it out into the open air. The butterfly wasn't very cooperative. I tried to get it out without success. I gave Ian back the cage. "Oh no," I thought, "what if it can't fly?" Just then the swallowtail took flight and soared over our heads, spiraling higher and higher. The delight on mother and son's faces was contagious. They made my day. Ian left with two more caterpillars. I hope to see all of them in about a month.

This process of metamorphosis is fascinating to people of all ages and would make a fun science project at home this summer. Use the following chart that lists the appropriate larval food plants for butterflies that are commonly found in our area.

Papilionidae - the Swallowtails

Black Swallowtail - parsley, dill, fennel
Giant Swallowtail - rue, citrus, hop tree
Spicebush Swallowtail - red bay, sweet bay, Spice bush, sassafras
Tiger Swallowtail - tulip poplar, cherry, willow
Zebra Swallowtail - pawpaw
Palamedes Swallowtail - pipevines, Polygonum

Pieridae - Whites & Sulphurs

Clouded or Common Sulphur - clover, legumes
Orange-barred Sulphur - Cassia

Nymphalidae - the Brush-footed Butterflies

Milkweed Butterflies
Monarch - milkweeds
Queen - milkweeds

Longwings or Passionflower Butterflies

Zebra Longwing - passionvine
Gulf Fritillary – passionvine

**Marianne Duvall works at Native Nurseries and is a Master Gardener volunteer and a member of the University of Florida IFAS Leon County Extension Advisory Committee.*

[\[Back\]](#)