

**Larval/Host Plants for Butterflies**  
**Marianne Duvall**  
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Flowers... when you hear butterfly gardening mentioned that's what most people think of. And flowers are essential for the nectar they produce for butterflies, but larval food, what the caterpillar eats, is just as important to the garden. The female butterfly is very site specific. She lays her eggs only on certain plants. The survival of the subsequent caterpillar depends on this. So in order to enjoy the entire life cycle of these insects we incorporate the plants needed by all the stages of the insect.

Larval / host foods run the plant world gamut from the lowly cudweed to the tasty lemon tree. Each year as I tend our nursery's butterfly garden I discover a new type larval food and caterpillar. Last year it was the common buckeye butterfly on snapdragons. I had been reluctant to pull out the fading snapdragons which were still blooming in June. When I finally decided to, lo and behold, there was this spiky black, white, and orange caterpillar gnawing on the healthiest stalk. We raised four buckeyes last year.

The year before last the cassia, what some people call a bean plant, delivered two different caterpillars. The dainty sleepy orange and the beautiful cloudless sulphur were both produced on this shrub. The cloudless sulphur's pupa or chrysalis was bright shocking pink. Most pupae or chrysalises we see are dull looking, more like dried up leaves. An added bonus was the pretty buttery yellow flower of the cassia plant.

Before the cassia was the discovery of American painted ladies on cudweed. The native cudweed is probably in your yard and you consider it a nuisance weed. I did too and unfortunately pulled it out of the garden before I knew it too was a larval food. Now I know that the American painted lady caterpillar hides in the seedy flower head. I now leave this weed alone.

I have given my best friend a copy of the larval/nectar food list for her garden in Sarasota . She promptly started planting and by the time I got to visit her the garden was spectacular and alive with butterflies. What impressed me most was the lush green vine covering the fence. Not only was it blooming the most indescribably exotic flower, it also boasted legions of hyperactive caterpillars. These turned out to be pipevine swallowtails. Though it was slow to start, we now have the pipevine growing in three areas of the garden. The pipevine swallowtail caterpillar's furious activity reminds me of the busy monarch. We have several different types of milkweed planted to lure both the female monarch and the female queen (*Danaus gilippus*). Usually we don't see the monarchs until later in the season, late August or September. And the queen hasn't been as prevalent as we would like, only showing up once every few years. But the milkweed does get eaten down and is a reliable re-seeder for us.

Passionvine, like the cassia, provides for more than one caterpillar. The Gulf fritillary, and the zebra longwing are found on the vine. The fritillary comes first and later in the season the zebra longwing, our state butterfly, makes an appearance.

My experience with caterpillars began with tiny yellow eggs on curly parsley. My boss, Donna, explained why the eggs were there and what was going to happen. From then on parsley, fennel and other members of the carrot family took on a new meaning for me. Not only were these plants beautiful and tasty to me, but also

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served a larval food for the Eastern black swallowtail. The herb rue also is host plant for the giant swallowtail, as well as the black swallowtail. Which brings us to the larval/host plant I am monitoring this year. The Hercules club or devil's walking stick is a prickly little native tree which attracts my favorite butterfly, the giant swallowtail. The caterpillar is also known in central Florida as the orange dog, an uninvited and unwelcome addition to the lemon and orange trees. I have watched as the female butterfly lays a single brown egg, which after few days hatches. The egg is replaced with a small caterpillar that looks very much like a bird dropping. The caterpillar isn't in a hurry taking what seems to be forever to grow and make its chrysalis. How such a soft creature could climb over such thorns amazes me still after a summer of witnessing such a feat.

When planting a butterfly garden, remember not only are the right nectar plants important, but the correct larval/host plants are too. It is extremely important to use pesticide-free plants. Most growers spray plants to kill caterpillars. Make sure your plants have not sprayed at the nursery. And remember, slow down and enjoy the butterflies.

*Marianne Duvall is an employee of Native Nurseries.*