

Attracting Caterpillars to Your Garden

by Alistair Glen

"Attract caterpillars? Are you crazy!", I can already hear some of you say. But I hope to change the way you regard these industrious and essential insects, by looking at the bigger picture and explaining the important role they play.

Many of us know that by planting milkweed we can attract Monarch butterflies, which lay their eggs on milkweed plants. From each egg a caterpillar hatches, eating milkweed leaves before retreating into a chrysalis. Around ten days later, a beautiful Monarch butterfly emerges. Life cycle complete—and we have in a small way helped the Monarch butterfly continue its journey of survival, a very satisfying achievement considering habitat loss and extinction of animal species is all around us. Which leads us to the most important reason to attract butterflies, moths, and other insects to our landscapes—not just for their beauty, but

for their ability to feed and sustain many other animals. For example, did you know that caterpillars and other insects are an excellent source of protein, and that most birds raise their young on caterpillars and other insects, not seeds and berries?

So, how can we attract caterpillars to feed other wildlife? First we have to look at our gardens in a new light, not one of "perfection" with blemish free leaves, but as a functioning ecosystem alive with diversity. Learn to tolerate a few chewed leaves. When you notice insect damage, instead of pulling out the pesticide bottle, take time to educate yourself on what's causing that damage. Most of our native caterpillars feed almost exclusively on native plants, with which they have coevolved over thousands of years.

This is one reason why exotic plants have become so popular with landscapers and home gardeners: most insects avoid them. Planting exotics may help

make your landscape "pest resistant," but it also creates an insect desert where hungry birds cannot find food to sustain themselves or their offspring. By planting native species in the garden we can attract many beneficial insects and create garden ecosystems that shelter a natural balance of insects and their predators.

So why is this all so important? One word can sum it up—biodiversity. We need a variety of animal and plant species to sustain a functioning ecosystem. Without a wide range of life, plants would not get pollinated and many species could become extinct. Plants and animals have evolved to be dependent on one another for pollination and food, so that when one disappears, the other soon follows. Consider how many acres are being developed in our area every year, and which species are being excluded from those acres due to the types of plants we choose for our landscapes. It will not take long before many of the insects, birds, and mammals dependent on native plants for food disappear forever from our rapidly urbanizing area.

For our future generations to see and appreciate the natural world as we do, it's important that we learn to welcome all sorts of creatures into our surroundings. Maybe in time we will all look at plants, not in terms of how pest resistant they are, but in terms of how many insects they attract. So, before you go and squish that caterpillar, think of it as "bird food" and consider tolerating a little damage for the sake of other species who call your landscape home.

Intrigued? If you would like to learn more about the dynamic between insects, birds, and native plants, and the many benefits of attracting "bird food" into the garden, Glen highly recommends you read Bringing Nature Home, written by Douglas W. Tallamy (see p.4).

Alistair Glen owns Growing Wild Nursery, which specializes in nursery-propagated native plants of the Atlantic coastal plain. Learn more about plants native to our area on his web site: www.growingwildnursery.net.



photo by Alistair Glen

The caterpillar here is a Phosphila turbulenta, a type of Noctuid moth. The caterpillar feeds only on Smilax species (Greenbrier). When planting larval plants in the hopes of attracting and supporting butterflies, expect for success to be accompanied by leaves with bites taken out of them.