

# Butterfly enthusiasts are spreading their wings

H2 Life at Home

By Carol Stocker

GLOBE STAFF

Butterflies have long been the good-will ambassadors of the insect kingdom. They are beautiful and also harmless. Even in their caterpillar (or larval) stage they do very little damage. (Most pest caterpillars, such as inchworms, mature into small, drab, night-flying moths like the winter moth, not butterflies.) Many gardeners plant flowers such as the aptly named butterfly bush to attract these "angels of the garden." But the most sophisticated gardeners are learning that it's much more helpful to the butterflies to provide host plants for their young. That's because most mature butterflies can sip from a wide variety of flowers, but their caterpillars are much more specialized eaters. It's a version of beauty and the beast: "You can't save the beautiful butterflies unless you save the host plants of their ugly caterpillars," said naturalist Peter Alden of Concord.

This kind of butterfly gardening can be as easy as not cutting down the wild cherry tree or spicebush that has invaded a corner of your yard. Though these plants are not particularly attractive, they will yield a stunning crop of large, black-and-yellow tiger swallowtail butterflies or iridescent blue-black spicebush swallowtail butterflies.

There will be a great opportunity to get expert advice on choosing from a large selection of native butterfly plants for sale Sunday from noon to 4 p.m. at The Bee and Butterfly Festival at The Garden in the Woods (180 Hemenway Road, Framingham; 508-877-7630; newenglandwildflower.org).

The first such festival last year (with butterfly meadow tours, comparative honey tastings, and hands-on activities like this year's) was "a big hit with families," said society staffer Bonnie Drexler. "Butterflies are fascinating for children because they've studied the different stages of metamorphosis in school."

Over the last 15 years, butterflies have also developed a new fan base among adult bird watchers, who are now pointing their binoculars down as well as up. This is significant because birders comprise the single largest environmental interest group and are good friends to have.

"There's a whole trend going on of bird watchers who have seen every bird in Massachusetts," said Alden. They're "standing out there

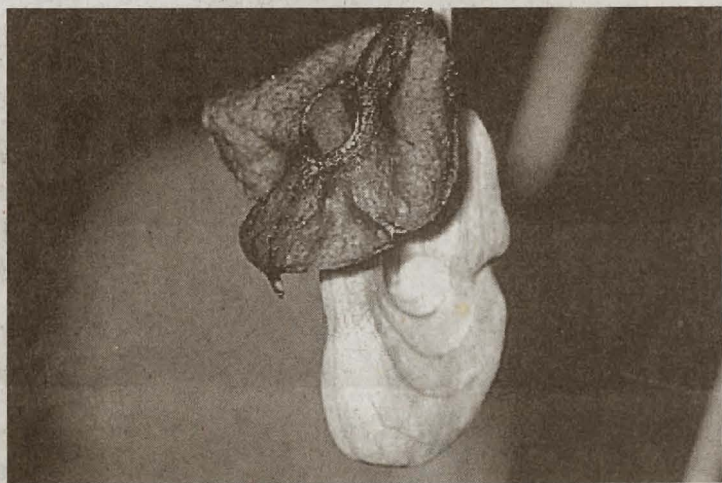
with their binoculars when it starts to get hot and the birds get quiet, and then the butterflies come out and they fly and you watch them."

The birders soon demanded butterfly field guides in color with range maps and standardized names, like the classic birding guides, and now suddenly there's a lot on the market. The most beautiful and in-depth new book is "Butterflies of the East Coast: An Observer's Guide" by Rick Cech and Guy Tudor.

Unlike butterfly collectors of old, who pinned their quarry in display cases, these new butterfly

watchers use binoculars and cameras. Cech, a Manhattan banker, photographed every butterfly species on the East Coast for his book, even spending a weekend wading in a frigid New Hampshire bog for a 25-second glimpse of a bog elfin butterfly. "And I got the picture!"

Most importantly, said Alden, "butterflies became a portal to the rest of nature. Most birders didn't used to care about plants. But butterfly watching forces people learn some botany so you can find the butterflies at their favorite plants. A lot of people have become all-around naturalists, star-





PHOTOS/THE NEW ENGLAND WILD FLOWER SOCIETY (ABOVE) AND "BUTTERFLIES OF THE EAST COAST" BY RICH CECH (AT LEFT)

**Above, an American lady butterfly visits a purple coneflower. At left (top to bottom), the pipevine swallowtail butterfly; the pipevine flower, which is a host for the pipevine swallowtail caterpillar; and the monarch butterfly.**

ing with birds, then butterflies. I used to be a pure bird watcher. I *only* cared about birds. But now I'm into biodiversity."

In fact, Alden has authored a biodiversity field book, "The National Audubon Society Field Guide to New England," with Brian Cassie. It contains photos and brief descriptions of the 45 butterfly species you are most likely to see of the 117 in Massachusetts, as well as a thousand other common native animals and plants.

"Caterpillars of Eastern North America; A Guide to Identification and Natural History," by David L.

Wagner, will help you sort out whether that skinny thing you just found nibbling your parsley is just a pest or will turn into something beautiful someday.

If you want to leave your own backyard, the 13-year-old Massachusetts Butterfly Club ([www.naba.org/chapters/nabamc/index.asp](http://www.naba.org/chapters/nabamc/index.asp)) offers field trips and has compiled "The Massachusetts Butterfly Club Guide to Good Butterfly Sites." And Kenn Kaufman, co-author with Jim P. Brock of yet another new guide, "Butterflies of North America," will be speaking for free on "Thoreau's Vision and the Future of Biodi-

versity," at 6 p.m. Sept. 23 at the Harvard Museum of Natural History, 26 Oxford St., Cambridge (for more information on this and a Sept. 24 nature walk, call 617-496-6972).

Despite all the attention, many kinds of butterflies are in decline. The orange-and-black monarch is our best-known butterfly but there have been few around for the last two summers, partly due to logging in their Mexican wintering grounds. One of our largest and most beautiful butterflies, the regal fritillary, simply disappeared from Massachusetts 20 years ago and we don't know why.

Butterflies are often in trouble because the native plants their caterpillars depend upon are under attack, said Cech. He points to exploding populations of browsing deer and alien plants wreaking havoc even in "protected" woods and meadows.

For instance, the mustard white butterfly will lay her eggs on garlic mustard, a very aggressive, imported, invasive plant, which is then toxic to the newly hatched caterpillars, unlike native mustard plants. "It's a death trap," said Cech. In the 1800s there were swarms of these butterflies in Harvard Yard. "Now you're lucky if you can find them in the Berkshire Hills."

Swallowwort, another hideous invasive plant marching through the state, plays the same trick on monarch butterflies and their young.

Can adding a few host plants in your backyard really make a difference to butterfly conservation? Cech says yes. The pipevine swallowtail butterfly is a "really gorgeous butterfly, with jet-black forewings and shimmering iridescent hindwings." It was comparatively common around the turn of the century when native Dutchman's pipevine (*Aristolochia macrophylla*) was in vogue for climbing up Victorian porches. Now we grow clematis instead and this butterfly's population has tumbled.

I asked Cech if the Dutchman's pipe that I happened to plant in my garden last month will produce pipevine swallowtail butterflies. "It will if there are any left in the area," he said.

There is, however, a caveat. "Unlike most butterflies, the pipevine swallowtail butterfly larvae will really eat your vine down to the ground. But it's evolved to re-sprout."

That's OK with me because the vine doesn't look like much, anyway. I'd rather have the butterflies.