

You can help improve food supply for butterflies

By Grazyna Tonkiel

As you've probably noticed, summer this year has been especially hot and sunny and therefore the most ideal for butterflies, which I perceive as "flying flowers."

For me, as a butterfly breeder, it has truly been an exceptional time. Compared to the previous year, I have almost tripled the number of butterflies in my garden. By now, you may know them by name: Coppers and Blues, Yellows and Whites and obviously many more, like the magnificent Canadian Giant and Black Swallowtails, and my beloved Painted and American Ladies, Commas and Skippers. This summer, I have lived with them all!

It looks like they like my garden, as much as I love their presence. I watch and care for the surroundings around them as they grow through all stages of their lives from eggs to caterpillars to chrysalises to adults flying above my head.

A couple of days ago, to my heart's delight, there was one Monarch step dancing on the broad leaves of one of almost the 100 milkweed plants I grow. Female butterflies truly dance ... well, since they taste plants with the ends of their legs, they look like they are practicing step dancing. They do it methodically and diligently, as they can't afford any mistake. Laying eggs on a wrong plant means death to the next generation, as caterpillars which hatch from eggs mostly depend on one host plant for feeding. Mother butterflies must lay eggs on a suitable host plant or a nearby one since caterpillars can't travel very far.

The location of the plants is also very

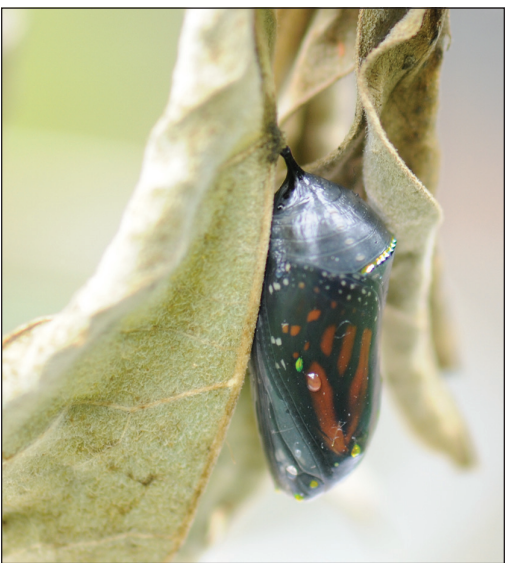
important, so the female butterfly selects them carefully. The best locations are sunny and dry. Humid, dark, moist places can promote fungal diseases fatal to eggs and caterpillars.

I attribute my success with breeding an increasing numbers of butterflies to uncompromisingly maintaining an unspoiled environment, free of chemicals of any sort and the massive planting of caterpillar host plants for different butterfly species. My Black Swallowtails love two patches of Flat Italian and Curly Parsley, as well as Dill. Whites and Yellows depend on Mustard Family plants (genus Brassica) which include Cabbages, Kohlrabi, Kale, Swiss chard and Brussels sprouts. White Clover, which I seeded to cover quite a bit of my lawn, serves to perfection both the Coppers and Blues, as a host caterpillar plant and also as sources of nectar for other butterflies.

Lavender plants are very happy this summer as they thrive in hot and dry conditions, their flowers provide fragrant paradise nectar for all scale wing creatures.

All milkweed growers know that this year the plants live up to their name and grow like weeds. Monarch butterflies should benefit. So far I have witnessed only two of them flying around, but the best is still to come. I have an impressive kindergarten of Monarch baby caterpillars vigorously munching away on milkweed and some already maturing in well-formed chrysalises.

Monarchs were gone from my surroundings for four years, but this year they are back. I am grateful and do my part, protecting them from predators. Wasps, dragonflies, spiders, and flies can infect butterfly eggs and caterpil-



lars with parasites, and mice sometimes look for them as a tasty snack. In September, after metamorphosis, Monarch butterflies will start their epic journey to Mexico. Before they depart I need to feed them well and provide them with lots of late summer bloom nectar. They like fall Asters, Goldenrod, Sunflowers, Cone flowers, Zinnias, Echinaceas and Fall-sage. I plant them all.

Please do the same, and remember that late blooming flowers are crucial to the survival of all butterflies. They need to eat for as long as possible to store nutrients in their bodies to survive their winter hibernation or arduous journey south.

I want to end this Butterfly report with a plea.

Beautify your gardens with Asters or other fall blooms. Feed the butterflies before winter. As we are stripping wildlife from their habitat, we must take steps to compensate the damage we inflict. Please give nature a helping hand, and when you see more butterflies next spring you will know that you have done your part.

Grazyna Tonkiel is an accomplished opera singer, visual artist and a conservationist. She was the soloist at the Polish Opera and Ballet Theatre in Warsaw, and won national and international vocal competitions. Her Butterfly Portraits are in private collections in over 10 countries. She can be reached at her Gallery Solo Studio in King City, www.gtonkiel.com



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