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## Hooked on Host Plants

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If you're like me, you go to the Native Plant Sale with a vision of summertime flowerbeds aflutter with beautiful and delicate butterflies. Perhaps your shopping list includes nectar providing favorites such as Bee Balm and Wild Bergamot (*Monarda*), Phlox (Phlox), and Coneflower (*Echinacea*).

But don't stop there! With the right mix of native plants, you could enjoy many species of butterflies and moths from March through Thanksgiving. Attracting the greatest number and variety of butterflies means selecting plants that meet their needs through all stages of development, including egg, larva, pupa and adult.

Many butterflies, such as the Tiger, Zebra, and Pipevine Swallowtails, overwinter as pupae, or chrysalises, suspended from twigs. Soon after hatching, adult butterflies search for nectar and a mate. Early season nectar plants including Serviceberries (*Amelanchier*), Trumpet honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*), and Wild Columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*) are critical to their survival.

Once mated, butterflies search for a particular food, or host, plant on which to lay their eggs. And they can be quite fussy about their selection. Some hatching larvae, or caterpillars, will eat only a single plant species. Fritillary larvae prefer Violets (*Viola*), while the Indigo Duskywing selects Blue Wild Indigo (*Baptisia australis*). The Common Hackberry (*Celtis occidentales*) will feed Mourning Cloak, Hackberry, Tawny Emperor, and Question Mark caterpillars. Spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*) feeds Spicebush Swallowtail caterpillars. Black Chokeberry (*Aronia melanocarpa*) provides food for Coral Hairstreak larvae, while the Maple-leaved Viburnum (*Viburnum acerifolium*) feeds Henry's Elfin and the Hummingbird Clearwing moth caterpillars. As a bonus, birds can enjoy the berries from many of these plants as well.

If you don't mind a slightly shaggy lawn, your white clover will feed Eastern-tailed Blue and Clouded Sulphur caterpillars, while Woolly Bears, larvae of the Isabella Tiger moth, and Giant Leopard moth caterpillars will gladly consume your dandelions. No need for weed killer!

Let's not forget about trees. The leaves of many native species feed both butterfly and moth larvae. Flowering Dogwoods (*Cornus sericea*) attract the early emerging Spring Azure. Eastern Tiger Swallowtail butterfly and Promethea moth larvae prefer Tulip trees (*Liriodendron tulipifera*). You might find a hairless green caterpillar with one bold black band and many yellow bands nibbling your Pawpaw (*Asimina triloba*) leaves. If so, you will soon enjoy the showy adult Zebra Swallowtail searching for nectar in your garden.

"Now hold on just a minute," you may say. "You're suggesting I spend hard-earned dollars on plants just so that caterpillars can eat them?" Let's face it, caterpillars are little munching machines, but they also help to support a healthy garden and ecosystem. They start their lives by eating incessantly until their skins stretch tightly. Then they molt and continue eating. Caterpillars will molt four to six times or more. The stages between molts are called instars, with the mature larvae often looking nothing like earlier instars. Single host plants often recover from munching caterpillars that soon transform into adults. Once they pupate into adult butterflies, they spend most of their time searching for mates and flower nectar. Lapping up nectar not only feeds the adult butterflies but is also critical to the pollination of many plant species. So while it may be difficult at first to see the loss of a few leaves, remember that many plants in your garden and in the surrounding ecosystem are just waiting for adult butterflies to visit their flowers in order to reproduce.

I became hooked on host plants by accident one summer. While pulling weeds in my herb garden, I noticed a parsley plant gnawed to nubbins by a platoon of caterpillars. The small black ones wore white center bands, while the larger green caterpillars sported green bands with yellow spots. "Oh joy, I'm a mother," I thought. Unfortunately, my brood of Black Swallowtail Butterfly instars with several molts to go had totally consumed their host plant. A quick check in my Peterson First Guide to Caterpillars assured me any member of the carrot family would suffice as food. Fantastic! I carefully scooped up the hungry darlings and dispersed them among various dill, fennel, and Queen Anne's Lace plants. Crisis averted! Since then my garden includes a dozen parsley plants – enough food for caterpillars and me.

Because many species of butterflies and moths complete more than one life cycle per season, late emerging adults need late blooming nectar sources. Good choices include the pinkish flower clusters of the Joe Pye Weed (*Eupatorium*), several varieties of Aster (*Smyphyotrichum*), Goldenrods, Ironweed, and the Milkweeds (*Asclepias*). Next spring, migrating Monarch Butterflies returning north will lay eggs along the way on young milkweed plants.

So get ready to double your butterfly fun this year. Plant some host plants for your favorite species and enjoy watching adult butterflies lay their eggs, larvae chomping up leaves, pupae hanging from twigs, and adult butterflies emerging to lap up bountiful flower nectar from your garden.