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Horticultural Therapist Competencies

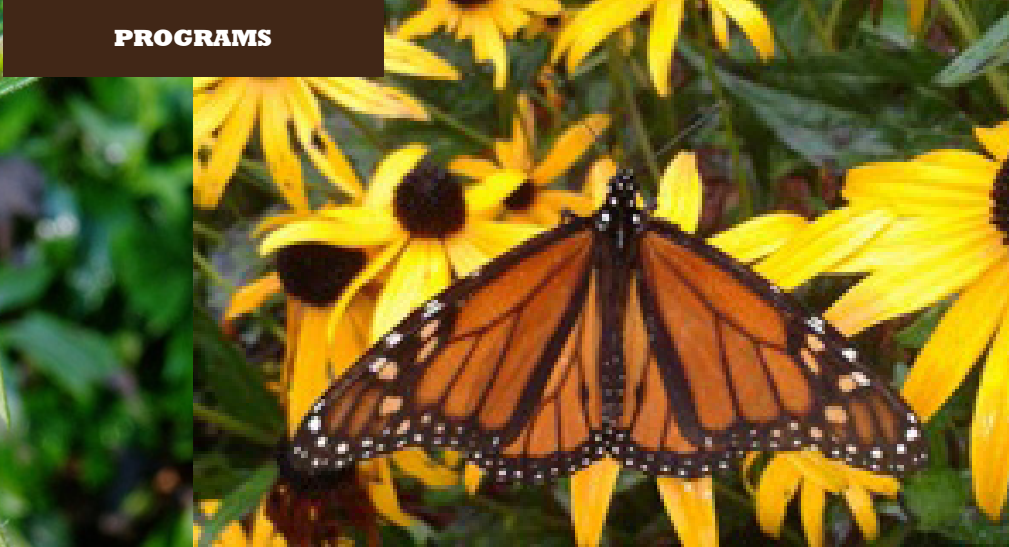
Working with Volunteers
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Monarch caterpillars on Asclepias



Male monarch butterfly on Rudbeckia

Host & Nectar Plants for a Horticultural Therapy Garden

By Erin Backus, HTR

Photo credits: Erin Backus

Butterflies and moths are an important part of a garden as they are excellent pollinators. Horticultural Therapy programs provide an opportunity to integrate gardening with the topic of insects, butterflies and their interrelationship with people. Tracking and learning about butterfly populations can help clients work on:

- Improving observation techniques,
- Building patience and self-esteem,
- Decreasing impulsivity,
- Increasing focus time, along with other skills.

Finding caterpillars and learning about the changes the caterpillar goes through can be an exciting experience, as well as an applicable therapeutic lesson.

Caterpillars and Host Plants | Butterflies and Nectar Plants

A garden needs to be rich in host and nectar plants in order to attract caterpillars and butterflies. Host plants are the plants that caterpillars eat, while nectar plants are plants that butterflies feed from. With that being said, most butterflies can be linked to certain plants and plant families.

Members of the Apiaceae family, such as parsley, dill, fennel, carrots, lovage, and the native Golden Alexander (*Zizia*), are the host plants for the Black Swallowtail. This butterfly is a favorite to track because it is abundant throughout the eastern United States and common in home gardens and natural habitats. It also has a large and colorful caterpillar in the summer and fall that clients easily spot while out in the garden.

Milkweed (*Asclepias*) or species in the *Asclepias* genus are excellent host and nectar plants for the Monarch. The American

Lady butterfly commonly uses Pussytoes (*Antennaria*) to make shelters out of many of the leaves on the tip of the plants. Spicebush Swallowtail often wrap themselves up in the leaves of spicebush or sassafras, both members of the Lauraceae family, while the Silver Spotted Skipper uses large leaved plants in the Fabaceae family, such as wisteria, as blankets. The Red Admiral butterfly makes shelters in stinging nettle leaves. These caterpillars are easy to spot once the host plant is identified.

In addition to having a variety of host plants available, it is essential to incorporate multi-season blooming plants that keep the butterflies fed and sticking around the garden. When possible, use native plant species. Some great nectar plants are Milkweed, Joe-pye Weed, Coneflower, Black Eyed Susan, Phlox, New England Aster, and Bee Balms. For gardens in warmer climates, more species can be tracked throughout the year. The Giant Swallowtail caterpillar eats plants in the Rutaceae family. The Polydamas and Pipevine Swallowtails use Dutchman's pipe (*Aristolochia* spp.), while Longwing butterflies, such as the Zebra, Julia, and Gulf Fritillary, use Passionflower vines for their caterpillars' food source.

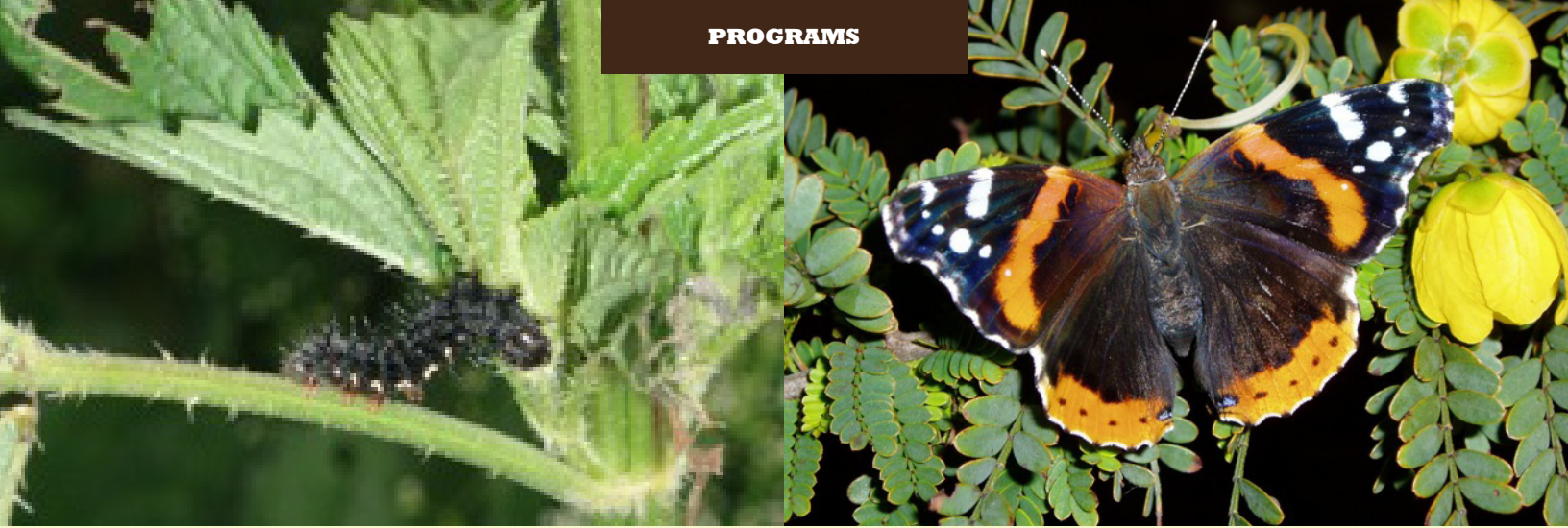
Establishing a Butterfly Garden

In addition to the careful selection of host and nectar plants, it is important to follow other guidelines when establishing a butterfly garden.

- When starting a butterfly garden, employ natural gardening techniques and avoid use of chemicals of any kind, including organic products. Butterflies and caterpillars are highly susceptible to any kind of oils and chemicals. This provides an opportunity to

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Red Admiral caterpillar on Stinging nettle

Red Admiral Butterfly

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discuss beneficial gardening methods, such as natural gardening and its importance with clients.

- Involving clients in the planning, establishment, and maintenance of the butterfly garden is essential to its upkeep. Clients can help seed, plant, water, and care for the garden. In doing so, it helps cultivate a sense of purpose and responsibility for individuals.

- Consider certifying the garden with the North American Butterfly Association (www.naba.org) and/or the National Wildlife Federation (www.nwf.org). Both have a straightforward registration process with particular guidelines to follow. The certification helps to maintain the garden habitat for proper living conditions, provide advice and support, and showcase certified gardens.

- Become more informed about local butterflies and their native habitats. The North American Butterfly Association provides information on local butterfly chapters and butterflies in general. Also, check out local native plant societies. For those in southern Florida, the Institute for Regional Conservation (www.regionalconservation.org) is an excellent source for Florida butterfly species that are linked to native plants.

Butterflying, or lepping can be a rewarding and a lifelong hobby to which clients can relate. It is a topic that can be easily added to any horticultural therapy program.

Erin Backus, HTR, has raised Lepidoptera species for 9 years. She has a Bachelor's in Plant Science, Ornamental Horticulture from SUNY Cobleskill. She currently works as a garden program facilitator for Green Chimneys, a residential treatment center for youth with social, emotional and learning disabilities in Brewster, New York. She also works part time as a gardener and butterfly consultant for Quaker Hill Native Plant garden in Pawling, New York. Erin enables people to understand the butterfly and plant relationship in a therapeutic environment through her company, Plant Happiness, LLC. Erin lives in Pawling, New York.

Tips for Going on a Caterpillar Hunt

Caterpillar hunts are a great way to engage clients, particular younger ones, to be on the lookout for hungry caterpillars, while also harvesting or tending the garden. Caterpillars can be brought inside by transporting the leaves they are on and placing them into a large terrarium with small vases full of fresh host plants. To allow the caterpillars to grow to their full potential, it is best to have them continue eating the plant that they started to eat when they were young. So, if they are found on parsley, keep feeding them parsley. Depending on the time of year, the pupae may emerge or overwinter in the chrysalis. If it does overwinter, make sure it is placed in a protected area, such as a drying shed, that is exposed to normal outside winter temperatures. This is also a good time to talk to clients about the safety concerns in handling and raising caterpillars. Caterpillars should only be moved by touching the plant. After the initial placement, caterpillars should be moved as little as possible. Once they emerge, release them close to the place where they were originally found, preferably in a location where they are protected away from harmful critters. This can be done as a program or fundraiser, and is more meaningful to clients when they have raised the butterflies themselves.