BOOKS


How To Attract Butterflies to Your Garden, by Nick Rossi. Saddle River, New Jersey: The Butterfly Garden, undated. 16 pages. $14.95 (paper). [Part of the “Home Garden Butterfly Kit,” which includes also ten packets of seeds.]


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For over fifteen years I have been striving to turn a wooded city lot into a haven for butterflies, birds, and salamanders. Fifty dump-truck loads of wood chips, untold bags of leaves, numerous rotting logs, and a rerouting of the storm drains have delighted the salamanders, extirpated whatever remained of the rear lawn, and started the final phase of controlling the already successful “butterfly meadow.” I confess that I didn’t know a thing about butterflies before starting; everything I learned I learned by making mistakes. But there is an easier way. If you are interested in butterfly gardening, preferably without making the kinds of mistakes I did and without needing fifty loads of wood chips, you might consider reading a book. There are three possibilities that I know of, and a fourth on its way.

The trick to successful butterfly gardening, it seems, is to realize that (1) butterflies come from caterpillars, (2) most caterpillars are quite particular about what species of plants they will feed upon, and (3) female butterflies will seek out the right species of plants on which to lay their eggs, ensuring thereby that the caterpillars will have food. Good butterfly gardens provide sacrificial food plants for the caterpillars as well as flowering plants for the adults. How To Attract Butterflies to Your Garden, by Nick Rossi, does not address this central issue. Instead, $14.95 gets you ten packets of seeds (an $8.90 value at my local hardware store) and a sixteen-page booklet that is long on enthusiasm for butterflies but short on information about plants and gardening. The three sections on attracting adult butterflies account for only thirty-three lines of text. I recommend that you buy your own seeds after spending $8.95 on Mathew Tekulsky’s The Butterfly Garden. Here is a straightforward and well organized introductory book. It has already helped me understand what makes a garden “work” from the perspective of a butterfly.

Tekulsky’s fourth chapter, “Getting Started,” cuts to the core of the issue—the need to get the butterfly’s entire life cycle to occur in your garden. Subsequent chapters, on larval food plants and nectar sources, and the various appendixes form the “gardening” core of the book. Here are lists of plants to use, notes on how to attract the fifty most-common species of butterfly in North America, nursery and seed sources of the plants, and the addresses of both butterfly-fancier and gardening organizations.
Since The Butterfly Garden is intended for use by gardeners throughout continental North America, much of the region-specific information has to be extracted from the text and appendices, but the information is there. I found the author's familiarity with Californian butterflies and plants helpful in illustrating several points, though the specifics were not always germane to butterfly gardening in New England. Chapters on butterfly biology, the rearing of butterflies, and conservation round the book out. If you are thinking about attracting butterflies to your garden, start with this book and then use your imagination.

Compulsive butterfly gardeners (mea culpa) will pay the small ransom needed to purchase Butterflies East of the Great Plains, whereas others may prefer to wine and dine their local librarians until the book is purchased. Butterflies East of the Great Plains is a stunning tour de force and is destined to be the classic reference for decades to come. Every species of butterfly known to occur or to stray into the eastern United States is presented. (Canada is excluded.) The text is accented by 324 color photographs of the butterflies in nature. For every butterfly species, the etymology of the Latin name, the geographic range (usually shown through exquisite maps), the habitat, the life history, and the adult and larval food plants are presented and discussed. The last subjects are a gold mine for butterfly gardeners. Enjoyable hours can be spent scanning the maps for your home area and then reading the text to find out what plants you will need to attract the flying lovelies. If the illustrations make you realize that you simply cannot live without pipe vine swallowtails gracing your yard, the text will inform you that you must have Aristolochia in the garden, while the range maps tell you whether the species lives in your area. If the plant material is sometimes unfamiliar to you (both Latin and common names are provided), use any good garden dictionary to find out about the plants.

Butterflies East of the Great Plains is the only tome I know of that provides the essential information on the butterflies of a given area, listing their critical food and nectar plants. If I have any qualms about recommending this book to the reader, it is that the binding may not be up to the long-term use the book will receive.

All three of the titles reviewed here will be available for inspection at the “Sky Gardening” symposium scheduled for May 31st. Among the attractions of the symposium will be an annotated list of the butterflies native to eastern Massachusetts and their larvae's food plants. The complete program for the symposium is given on page 48.

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