Maryland's Wild Acres

HABITAT - the arrangement of food, water, cover, and space - IS THE KEY.

In This Issue

Forward

Welcome to the Summer issue of Habi-Chat! As you may have noticed, we now have a new section on the Wild Acres site known as Greening Your Landscape. Keep checking back for new additions to this section.

June is also a special month to get outside with Great Outdoors Month going on and National Pollinator week from June 18th-24th. To celebrate National Pollinator week, this installment of Habi-Chat will focus on pollinators and ways to attract them to your landscape. For more information on pollinators, check out the US Fish and Wildlife Pollinator Site.

If there is a particular topic that you would like to see on our site, then please don't hesitate to contact me to let me know! My information can be found at the bottom of this newsletter. Happy Habitats!

Maryland Native Plant Profile……Common Milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*)

Common milkweed is an herbaceous plant in the milkweed family (Asclepidaceae). It is found throughout much of the United States, east of the Rockies. Common milkweed is a perennial plant that grows up to 6 feet tall. It has broad, opposite leaves filled with a sticky white sap.

Common milkweed flowers throughout June. Its flowers are generally a pale pink to reddish in color and are clustered in an umbel at the top of the plant. Often times, the umbel will slightly droop, and its flowers contain a slightly sweet scent. The flower petals are slightly reflexed or bent backwards. After about a month, the pollinated flowers will turn into fat seedpods that are 3-4 inches long. The seedpods have small prickles on them and will be green and fleshy until they mature to a dry, brown capsule filled with feathery seeds.

Over 450 insects have been documented feeding on common milkweed. Monarch butterflies, for example, host on this plant. As the caterpillars munch on the leaves of milkweed, they ingest the white sap filled with chemicals called glycosides. These glycosides are toxic to most mammals as well as birds, making the Monarch caterpillars and adults poisonous to predators. Other insects commonly found on milkweed include milkweed tussock moth caterpillars, large and small milkweed bugs, milkweed assassin bugs and milkweed aphids.

Milkweed bugs and aphids congregate on milkweed (left) while a monarch caterpillar rests on milkweed pods (right) Photos by Kerry Wixtedh

Maryland Native Wildlife
Monarch Butterfly (Danaus plexippus)

Perhaps one of the best known butterflies in the United States is the monarch butterfly. These colorful butterflies have a wingspan up to 4 inches. The upper part of the wings is colored a bright orange and lined with veins and margins outlined in black. Two series of white spots can be found at the base of the wings. Monarchs are often confused with viceroy butterflies due to their similar markings. However, if you look at the hindwing and see a black bar, then it is a viceroy butterfly.

A comparison of a monarch (left) and a viceroy (right). Note the bar on the hindwing of the viceroy.
Photos by Kerry Wixted

In addition to their beauty, monarchs are also known for their amazing annual migration. In the spring, adult monarchs migrate northward from Mexico. During this migration, females will deposit eggs on milkweed plants. Females can lay up to 300 eggs at this time, and they generally die afterwards. When the eggs hatch, the caterpillars will feed on the toxic substances in milkweed to become poisonous to predators.

Monarch chrysalis.
Photo by Kerry Wixted

The caterpillars will spend a few weeks eating away at the plants, then they will transform into a chrysalis which later hatches into an adult. This second generation of monarchs will continue the northward push of migrating, mating and egg laying.

The third generation will repeat the same process and ultimately will get as far north as possible (usually Canada).

The fourth generation will then migrate southward, back to butterfly sanctuaries in places like Mexico to overwinter until the spring. The fourth generation of monarchs lives up to 9 months compared to the 6 week cycles for the other generations.

To read a more in-depth article about the amazing Monarch journey, then check out this Maryland Natural Resource Article from 2007.

You can attract monarchs to your yard by planting milkweed. Common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca)* is the preferred host plant for monarchs, but they have also been found on swamp milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*) and butterflyweed (*Asclepias tuberosa*). Purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*), Zinnias, Joe pye-weed (*Eupatorium maculatum*), black-eyed susans (*Rudbeckia hirta*) and blazing stars (*Liatris spicata*) are also great nectar plants for adults.

Dr. Mike Raupp from the University of MD Extension Service will be talking about Monarch butterflies at the Howard County Conservancy on August 11th at 10am. The talk is free and open to the public.

Habitat Tips: Pollinator-Friendly Practices

Recently, attracting pollinators has been all the buzz- both literally and figuratively! Much of the talk has been centered around the steep declines in pollinators in both non-native honeybees as well as native species.

On the honeybee front, much of their decline is due to a phenomenon known as Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD). While not much is known about this disorder, it is causing large scale declines in our honeybee populations. Since 70% of our plants require pollinators to produce fruits- this is major cause of concern!

One way that you can help out pollinators like honeybees as well as others is to employ a few pollinator-friendly practices in your wild-scape. Doing so will help out pollinators as well as plants in your gardens!

Pearl crescent dines on milkweed. Photo by Kerry Wixted

Step 1: Create a bloom buffet

By including a variety of flowers that bloom at different times of the year, you will create a landscape that is appealing to a diversity of pollinators throughout the year. For example, red or orange tubular flowers generally attract hummingbirds as well as butterflies and moths.

In contrast, bees are generally attracted to bright white, yellow or blue flowers that are regular or bowl-shaped. Dull or green flowers that are bowl shaped tend to bring more beetle pollinators.

If you are aiming to attract butterflies, then choose plants that adults nectar on as well as plants they use to lay their eggs on. A few examples of plants to provide are detailed on the Hummingbirds, Butterflies and Bees page. You can also plant a Moon Moth Garden to attract night-feeding pollinators. In addition, planting flowers in clumps, instead of mixing species, will attract more pollinators.

Step 2: Provide shelter and egg-laying habitat

Pollinators, like other animals, require shelter and nesting sites. To attract bee pollinators, you can put out mason bee or bumblebee houses or leave open, sandy soil for ground-nesting bees. To attract butterflies, you can plant flowers and trees that provide larval hosting sites. For example, common milkweed is used by monarchs while violets are used by fritillary butterflies.

You can find a list of Maryland butterflies and their attractants here. In the fall, you can also place out Logpiles for Butterflies. Logpiles are much more effective at attracting overwintering butterflies than butterfly houses which can be purchased or built.

Assassin bugs are beneficial insects that can control insect pests. Photo by Kerry Wixted

Step 3: Eliminate pesticide-use or use pollinator-friendly pesticides

Common pesticides like carbaryl and malathion are extremely toxic to bees and other pollinators. Even some herbicides can be problematic for pollinators. For a list of chemicals toxic to bees, then check out this list from the Ohio State University.

If you need to use pesticides on your property, then consider using Organic-Approved Pesticides. The National Sustainable Agricultural Information Service also has a database of pests and pollinator-friendly solutions here. Beneficial bugs can also assist you with controlling pests.

Step 4: Provide clean, fresh water

Pollinators, like all other animals, require a source of fresh water. Most pollinators, like butterflies, prefer shallow water surfaces. You can easily make a butterfly water source out of a terra cotta saucer filled with sand and water. Make sure the water just barely covers the top of the sand. In addition, you can use bird baths for bees and bird pollinators. Be sure to change the water in whatever you provide every other day as well as disinfect the water container every few months.

Backyard Wildlife Fun for Kids: Attracting Butterflies

Butterflies and moths are important pollinators for many native plants. They also are whimsical sights for both the young and the old. Butterflies and moths are easy to attract, and you can easily get children involved in creating a butterfly-friendly landscape. One great butterfly-attracting craft is to create a butterfly puddling area.

Butterflies, like all animals, need water and minerals to survive. Male butterflies, in particular, tend to congregate in “mud bars” or small mud puddles to drink water and to seek out salts and minerals needed for breeding. There are two easy ways to create a puddling oasis: make a mud puddle or make a puddling platform.

A Swallowtail Puddling-Party.
Photo by Kerry Wixted

Mud Puddle 101

Making mud puddles comes naturally to kids! Select a sunny, open area in your yard preferably near flowering plants. Remove grass or plants from a 10-12 inch diameter area. Gently loosen the soil at a depth of 2-3 inches. Amend the soil with sand and manure if it is too clayey. Once the area is open, moisten the soil with water then wait for butterflies. Moisten the soil every few days and be sure to hand pull any plants which try to spring up in the mud puddle. Make sure the area does not have standing water; rather, keep it a nice muddy consistency. You can sprinkle a pinch of Epsom salts or table salt within the puddle to make it more enticing.

Puddling Platforms

If you don’t want to make your own mud puddle, then you can make puddling platform out of simple household materials. Find an old terra cotta saucer, shallow plate or pie pan to make into a platform. Fill the platform with sand and then have kids place flat stones throughout the saucer. Feel free to have the kids decorate the stones or outside of the platform. Once the sand and stones are in place, add enough water to just barely cover the sand. Make sure that the stones are above the water, serving as small landing platforms. Place the platform in a sunny, open area near flowering plants. You can either place the platform on top of the ground, or you can excavate a small area to sink the puddling platform into it. Add water as needed. You can sprinkle a pinch of Epsom salts or table salt within the platform to make it more enticing.

Extra Info

Butterflies are most active during warm, sunny days. During these times, you can put together a nature journal of the different butterflies that visit your puddle/platform. Are they all the same types? Draw pictures of the butterflies and then try to identify them. You can consult the Common Butterfly and Skipper page for some pictures of common species.

Wild Acres in Action

To keep up with the pollinator theme for this issue of Habi-Chat, I decided to share my own Wild Acres story. After writing about and researching bees, I put up my first mason bee house in early March. A few weeks later, I had residents! Mason bees are solitary nesting bees that use holes in old stumps and trees to nest in. You can replicate this by putting up a bee house. Mason bees are great native pollinators for early spring plants- including fruit trees. I placed this box by my blueberry plants, and the females pollinated by blueberries in order to leave pollen for their young. For anyone who is interested in pollinators, then consider buying or making your own Mason Bee house. More information can be found on our Wild Acres bee page.

Feel free to send me stories about your Wild Backyard! We want to hear from you! Letters, e-mail, photos, drawings. Let us know how successful you are as you create wildlife habitat on your property.

Mason bee house.
Photo by Kerry Wixted

If you enjoyed this issue of Habichat, you might want to check out our Online Habichat Archive and the List of Habichat Articles by Topic.

Dates to Remember

- 6/7- 6:30pm Wild-scaping Your Backyard Habitat talk by Kerry Wixted, at O'Malley Senior Center http://www.aacounty.org/Aging/activeSeniors/omalley.cfm
- 6/20- 7:30pm Rain Garden Design by Dana Puzey. This talk is hosted by the Maryland Native Plant Society and will be housed at Druid Hill Park For more info, visit the Maryland Native Plant Society website (http://mdflora.org/)
- 6/22- 7:00pm Destination Pollination: Exploring the World of Pollinators by Kerry Wixted at All Saint's Lutheran Church in Bowie, MD. For more information, please contact Kerry Wixted at 410-260-8566.
- 6/28- 7:00pm What's Bugging Your Yards? Beautiful – and Sustainable – Landscaping by Dr. Paula Shrewsbury at the Howard County Conservancy in Woodstock, MD (http://www.hcconservancy.org/upcoming-events.html) $10/family; $12 after June 26
- 7/18- 10:00am Wild-scaping Your Backyard Habitat talk by Kerry Wixted, at Pascal Senior Center in Glen Burnie, MD (http://www.aacounty.org/Aging/activeSeniors/pascal.cfm)
- 8/11- 10:00am Dr. Mike Raupp will give a talk about monarch butterflies at the Howard County Conservancy in Woodstock, MD (http://www.hcconservancy.org/upcoming-events.html)

Acknowledgements:

- All photos by Kerry Wixted

We want to hear from you!

Letters, e-mail, photos, drawings. Let us know how successful you are as you create wildlife habitat on your property.

Write to Me!

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Habichat, the newsletter for Maryland's Stewards of Backyard Wildlife, is published by the Wildlife and Heritage Service, Maryland Department of Natural Resources.