

*Where Dragons Fly*  
*Part One*

By Kim Smith

Several readers have inquired as to what to plant to attract dragonflies. Dragonflies and damselflies are predaceous and do not take nectar from flowers; they belong to the insect order Odonata, which is derived from the Greek “odonto-” meaning toothed. Dragonflies have strongly biting mandibles and prey primarily on insects. We can plant nectar plants that attract small insects, site the plants in close proximity to fresh water and provide places for the Odonata to perch. The body of water can be as small as a birdbath or as large as a pond. The photo of the Widow Skimmer dragonfly (*Libellula luctuosa*) was taken in the hot mid-day sun of early summer. He was perched on a bamboo stake in the center of a border planted with a treasure trove of nectar-rich inflorescences comprised of small florets, ideally shaped for probing pollinators, in other words, potential prey. Several feet away is a birdbath, which is also a lure to small insects. Difficult to discern from the newsprint photo, but radiating from the mineral violet central wing pattern is a sheen of iridescent blue.

The greatest numbers of different species of Odonata are found at sites that offer a variety of microhabitats. The Dragonfly Kingdom, the first of its kind worldwide, is a park located in Nakamura Japan, and is devoted entirely to the conservation and study of Odonata. The founder, Mitsutoshi Sugimira, has identified the habitat requirements of each species and created its ideal habitat within the park. Making use of the water supply of former rice fields, a series of pools has been created--deep pools and shallow pools, marshy and muddy areas, vegetated ponds and small streams, surrounded by a forest for the dragonflies to forage and to rest.

The dragonfly is a national emblem of Japan. An ancient history of Japan compiled in 720 AD titled *Nihon Shoki*, or *Chronicle of Japan*, mentions dragonflies, called *akitsu*. The *Chronicle* reads that Jimmu Tenno, Japans first emperor, climbed a mountain in Yamato and gazed down, declaring the shape of his country is like two *akitsu* mating. This gave rise to Japans former name of *Akitsu Shima*, or Dragonfly Isles.

Japanese people are ardent fans of insects—fireflies, crickets and butterflies, and insects that prey on insects that eat rice plants, including praying mantis and dragonflies. The earliest evidence of this is from ceremonial bronze *dotaku* bells from the Yayoi Period, approximately the second century BC to the third century AD. The bells are painted with primitive images of dragonflies, spiders and praying mantis and are thought to be prayers for a good harvest. Long, rainy summers and numerous rivers and streams provide the ideal habitats for dragonfly nymphs and adults. At all stages of its life the dragonfly is wedded to water. Japanese farmers believed the presence of dragonflies in their fields meant an abundant rice harvest.

The dragonfly is a symbol of victory, happiness and courage. Traditionally known as *kachi-mushi* or the “invincible insect,” the dragonfly was a symbol of strength among

Japanese warriors. The samurai decorated their leather armor, helmets and sword guards with emblems of dragonflies. During the Buddhist festival Bon, when the Japanese honor their ancestors, *Shoryo Tombo* (Dragonfly of the Dead) carries the spirit of the dead home to be reunited with their families. Dragonfly images appear on paintings and prints, ceramics, furniture, and fabrics.

The Japanese perception of dragonflies is dramatically different to that of old European beliefs. Thought to be companion to snakes and tools of the devil, the Spanish word for dragonfly is *Caballito del Diablo* (“Devil’s Horse”) and the French *l’aguille du diable* (“Devil’s Needle”). Swedish and Norwegian folktales had dragonflies blinding eyes and piercing eardrums. The Italians believed that they were sent by Satan to cause mischief and are known as “witches animals.” English and American folklore had dragonflies stitching close the lips of lying children, scolding women and men who curse; hence the name “Devil’s Darning Needle”.

Despite their fearsome name, dragonflies are completely harmless. Odonata are beneficial insects; their larvae are aquatic, predatory and occur in nearly all inland waters, consuming and assisting in the control of insect pest such as mosquitoes, midges, biting flies, and gnats.

The insect order Odonata is divided into three sub-orders: Zygoptera (damselflies), Anisoptera (dragonflies) and Anisozygoptera, known primarily from fossils with only two extant species, one in Japan and one in the Himalayas. Anisoptera, or *true dragonflies*, comprise the most species rich of the sub-orders and are more typically seen in our gardens. Damselflies are usually smaller than dragonflies. Dragonflies fly higher and more powerfully, whereas damselflies tend to skim the surface of water and seek shelter in vegetation. Dragonflies alight with their wings spread wide and flat. Damselflies perch with their wings folded over their abdomen or only slightly spread.

Next week will continue with dragonfly biology and information relating to species seen in our New England gardens.

*Male Widow Skimmer Dragonfly ~ Libellula luctuosa*

