

Growing Native

By Kim Smith

“The environment is where we can all meet; where we all have a mutual interest; it is the one thing that we all share. It is not only a mirror of ourselves, but a focusing lens on what we can become...” Lady Bird Johnson, 1967

With children back to school after winter break, I find myself daydreaming about the approaching warm weather season in our garden. Through ice-crystal sparkled windows made all the more brilliant with reflected sunlight from snow blanketed borders, I am trying to envision where, for heaven’s sake, in our tiniest of lots, I will fit the recently placed order of seeds and plants for the pollinators. To name several notables: regional species of milkweed (*Asclepius incarnata*, *A. syriaca*, and *A. verticillata*), Bird’s Foot violets for the fritillaries, Cardinal Climber—attractive to hummingbirds, a purportedly hardy *Jasmine officinale*, and several New Jersey tea plants. Our ever-shrinking lawn, if you could even call it a lawn any more, will definitely be made smaller again this year. In addition to widening the borders, annually we have been broadcasting seeds of white clover and carefully mowing around the spreading violets; the lawn, too, has now become a paradise for the pollinators.

New Jersey tea (*Ceanothus americanus*) is a low-growing (to three feet) suckering shrub native to East Coast. This unobtrusive petite shrub lights up the garden in mid-summer when its airy plumes of creamy white honey-scented flowers attract an array of pollinators. *Ceanothus americanus* is a larval host for the Spring Azure and the now extirpated Mottled Duskywing. It is a nectar source for a wide variety of skippers and butterflies including the Atlantis Fritillary, Banded, Striped, Edwards’, and Acadian Hairstreaks, Dreamy Duskywings, and Peck’s and other skippers. New Jersey tea also attracts a small fly with which hummingbirds feed their young.

Ceanothus americanus will grow in average garden soil provided it is planted in a well-draining location. They will thrive in full sun, though the New Jersey tea tolerates some light shade. The leaves may be dried to make a refreshing beverage, similar to *Camellia sinensis* (beverage tea), and was used during the American Revolutionary War as a substitute for black tea.

Planted in the dappled shade cast by our pink flowering dogwood (*Cornus florida rubra*) are species mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*) and lowbush blueberries (*Vaccinium angustifolium*). Growing in the foreground, in full sun, are native lupines (*Lupinus perennis*). The feathery white panicles of the New Jersey teas will add a lovely counterpoint to the evergreen emerald foliage of the mountain laurel. With blossom and berry and attractive foliage, this corner of our garden not only provides four seasons of beauty, it is a beacon to the transient Lepidoptera gracing our garden. Hopefully we will soon play host to the Spring Azure’s tiny pink caterpillars as well!

Rhythm and harmony, form and fragrance and personal preference in associations of color are all integral components in creating a garden design. Of equal importance is planning a garden rich

in species of indigenous plants to support butterflies, moths, skippers, and the myriad of beneficial insects that will also call make themselves at home in the garden planned for pollinators. Worth noting is that songbirds will instinctively be drawn to this native paradise. I am not recommending to simply integrate only colorful nectar plants, but to seek out and plant native larval host plants, to support the Lepidoptera caterpillars along with their volant counterparts.

Although creating backyard sanctuaries for the Lepidoptera, one garden at a time, does not in any measure equal the wholesale destruction of the habitat of native plant species globally, regionally and locally, or give us pause to relinquish our responsibility in making changes individually and collectively, it will remind us of what is at stake and that a positive evolution in our thinking is possible. Change is what we are talking about—change in the way in which we think about using our natural resources (heating and air-conditioning multi-thousand square foot homes and businesses), converting to hybrid automobiles as an alternative to gas guzzling SUV's, and siting and planning the surrounding space of new homes, housing developments and businesses to support indigenous plant species and wildlife. Butterflies are a symbol of hope—hope in the ability of the human spirit to transform to an awakening of our interconnectedness to our planet. The well known and yet, anonymous, quote *The effects of the butterfly's wings are felt around the world* can be interpreted to mean just that.

Each of our individual butterfly gardens may be a tiny oasis surrounded by a desert sea of boiling asphalt, arid pesticide crusted lawns and chemically enriched golf courses. With a willingness to share information and armed with this knowledge, it is possible, on the most grassroots level, to help make a difference in how we think about gardening and new ways in which we go about creating our gardens. Throughout the growing season passers-by inquire what, growing in our garden, is this and that particular plant, so vividly demonstrating its appeal to the butterflies. Now these same plants are growing in our neighbors' gardens, flowering and luring pollinators into their gardens. Imagine what one who gardens on a property with space enough for large native host trees and shrubs can achieve, if on our tiny lot, we are hosting an ever-increasing bevy of butterflies and caterpillars. Oh the possibilities!



Kalima latifoila and Spring Azure