

The Red Admirable ~ *Vanessa atalanta rubria*

Perhaps you may have noticed the friendly Red Admiral navigating your landscape. Their wing pattern is unmistakable, bordered by white checks, with perfect arcing bands of vermilion across the forewings and hindwings, against a background of rich chocolate black. Over the past several months we have observed them nectaring at the ‘Beauty of Moscow’ lilacs and mock orange (*Philadelphus* x ‘Innocence’), basking on the sun-soaked boards of the porch railings, darting in and out of the shrubs, alongside roadways, and flitting about the meadow’s edge. Friends and family, upon returning from boating expeditions around Cape Ann, report hundreds streaming inshore from across the water.

Many favorite and well-known species of butterflies are migratory. Within the last thirty-plus years the Monarch migration has been widely studied, corresponding to the discovery of their winter habitat in 1975. Much less is known about the migration of other common species such as the Red Admiral, Painted Lady, American Lady, Common Buckeye, and Mourning Cloak. Unlike birds, which have the ability to fly into strong winds, butterflies must take advantage of gentle north or northwest tailwinds for their southward journey, and therefore their migrations are usually not as concentrated as those of birds. The last banner year for the Red Admiral migration was in 2001, before that 1990; approximately every ten years there is a recorded increase in the number of migrants.

Nabokov referred to *V. atalanta* as the Red Admirable and they appear several times in his novels to foreshadow death. “Its coloring is quite splendid and I liked it very much in my youth. Great numbers of them migrated from Africa to Northern Russia, where it was called ‘The Butterfly of Doom’ because it was especially abundant in 1881, the year Tsar Alexander II was assassinated, and the markings on the underside of its two hind wings seem to read 1881.”

Red Admirals are Holarctic, a term used by zoologists to define the ecozone covering much of North America and Eurasia, which share many faunal characteristics. In our region, Red Admirals are a migratory species that cannot withstand cold winter temperatures. Their numbers in any given year vary, from uncommon to abundant, and their abundance depends on the nature of that year’s migration and the success of the resulting breeding season. In the first week of May, Red Admirals begin to appear from overwintering populations in North Carolina and southward. Males perch from advantageous lookouts and will dart out to investigate passersby—prospective mates, other insects, and humans. Famously friendly, the Red Admiral readily alights on people. They are on the wing almost continuously from May to October. The second, and quite possibly third generation, from the initial spring flight, begins the southward migration in late August to October.

The caterpillar’s primary food source is nettles—in New England these include Stinging, Tall, False, and Wood Nettles, all of which are unsuitable for the garden, particularly a small garden. The caterpillars “sew” the edges of the nettle leaves together with their silk and feed from within the shelter. The adults nectar at a wide variety of plants and are attracted to sap flows, rotting fruit, bird droppings, and wet soil.

Red Admirals are equally at home in the shady understory of floodplain forests and sunny gardens. Join with fellow gardeners to create pesticide-free and nectar-rich corridors to provide safe travel for late-season migrants. The following ten plants are at the top of my list for providing late-season blooms for migrating butterflies. It is not too late in the season to plant annuals such as zinnias, lantana and *Verbena bonariensis*. In its first year, the butterfly bush grows several feet and flowers profusely. Perennials will take several years to fill out, but there is no time like the present to get them underway.

Top Ten Plants for Migrating Butterflies

New England aster (*Aster novae-angliae*)
Korean daisy (*Chrysanthemum* ‘Single Apricot Korean’)
Coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*)
Joe-pye weed (*Eupatorium purpurea*)
Seaside goldenrod (*Solidago sempervirens*)
Mexican Sunflowers (*Tithonia rotundiflora*)
Zinnia (*Zinnia elegans*)

Butterfly bush (*Buddleia davidii*)
Lantana (*Lantana camara*)
Verbena bonariensis

Note all these plants share a similar characteristic, that of tiny tubular florets. The first seven plants in the list are members of the Composite family, with their ray flowers arrayed around the nectar-rich florets of the center disk, providing a convenient landing pad for the nectaring Lepidoptera. The florets of the butterfly bush, *Verbena bonariensis* and lantana are grouped in clusters, also making it easier for the butterflies to drink greater quantities of nectar. Planted this year in our garden, we are experimenting with two purported exceptional butterfly attractants. They are fragrant aster ‘October Skies’ (*Aster oblongifolius*) and meadow blazing star (*Liatrus ligulistylus*). We’ll keep you posted on whether or not to add these plants to your butterfly garden.

Resources: Zinnia, coneflower, Joe-pye weed and butterfly bush are generally available from Goose Cove Gardens, Corliss Brothers and Wolf Hill; *Verbena bonariensis* from Goose Cove; lantana from Wolf Hill and Corliss; New England aster and seaside goldenrod were acquired from collecting seeds along the shoreline and Korean daisy was a passalong from a friend.

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Red Admiral and Korean Daisy

