

In Defense of Lilacs

Do you see in the photo how perfectly the arcing abdomen of the Spot-winged Glider dragonfly mirrors the color and curving shape of the emerging russet-red foliage of the dogwood? I was standing at the kitchen sink washing dishes and gazing into my Lilliputian wild garden when I observed this beauty landing on a dogwood branchlet. He quickly settled into an arcing position and poised perfectly still for nearly twenty minutes, until my approach with camera in hand became too close for comfort. I didn't think I had taken any satisfactory photos because it was difficult to discern between the rusty red leaves and where it was situated amidst the withering pink blossoms. Dragonflies often visit this sunny corner of the garden. They will perch for long periods of time hunting and basking on sun-warmed branches and bamboo stakes. The water in the birdbath, along with an abundance of nectar plants growing nearby, is an invitation to smaller insects, which is the dragonfly's primary source of food. Making use of our pink flowering dogwood, to date, we have observed Spring Azure butterflies ovipositing, Monarch butterflies mating and resting on the foliage, and most recently, this dramatic skimmer mimicking the foliage. I have had good success in attracting wildlife by planting a northeast regional Lepidoptera host tree and surrounding it with lower growing native host and nectar plants, which are also appealing to all manner of insects. For example, adjacent to our pink flowering dogwood (*Cornus florida* var. *rubra*) is a shrub-sized sweetbay magnolia, both surrounded by blackberry and lowbush blueberry bushes, New Jersey tea, various milkweeds, *Phlox davidii*, *Lupinus perennis* and several different species of asters.

The symbiotic relationship between the dragonfly and the indigenous dogwood gave me pause to think about a lecture I recently attended on gardening with native plants specifically to support insects, which in turn support larger forms of wildlife—songbirds, rodents, bats, and small mammals. Fortunately, gardening with native plants is increasing in popularity and many nurseries are supplying an ever-growing demand from consumers. Barbara at Goose Cove Gardens introduced me to an unfamiliar species of yellow and very tall coneflower (*Rudbeckia laciniata* 'Autumn Sun'), a Monarch magnet growing in her perennial garden. I had been searching for something tall with fresh yellow blossoms that could also tolerate some light shade; sunflowers were definitely out as they languish in anything but full sun. Tall coneflower, alternatively called cut-leaf coneflower, can reach nine feet in the wild, but three to five feet is its more common size. Barbara's was approximately two feet tall and almost as wide after one year planted in her garden, and it is still early in the season. Tall coneflowers are native to nearly every state and province in the U.S. and Canada. I planted my little purchase next to the milkweeds, New England asters, goldenrod, and meadow blazing star (*Liatris ligulistylus*).

Creating gardens using indigenous plants is something we can all accomplish. Gardeners with vast acreage can more easily create a rich and varied web of life, and so can we who garden on a postage stamp. Gardening for wildlife has become increasingly imperative, especially if you dwell in an urban or suburban area surrounded by pavement and poison-encrusted lawns. For those who garden east of the Rocky Mountains, it is particularly important to provide way stations for the songbirds and Lepidoptera annually migrating northward and southward. Frankly, though, I do not restrict planting to only natives. My criteria for creating a garden that supports the web of life is that a planting either feeds people or wild creatures, and must also create a visual jamboree that draws visitors, human and non-human alike, into the garden, especially when surrounded by sterile landscapes. Readily available is a treasure trove of non-indigenous plants that attract Lepidoptera and a wide variety of pollinators and beneficial insects.

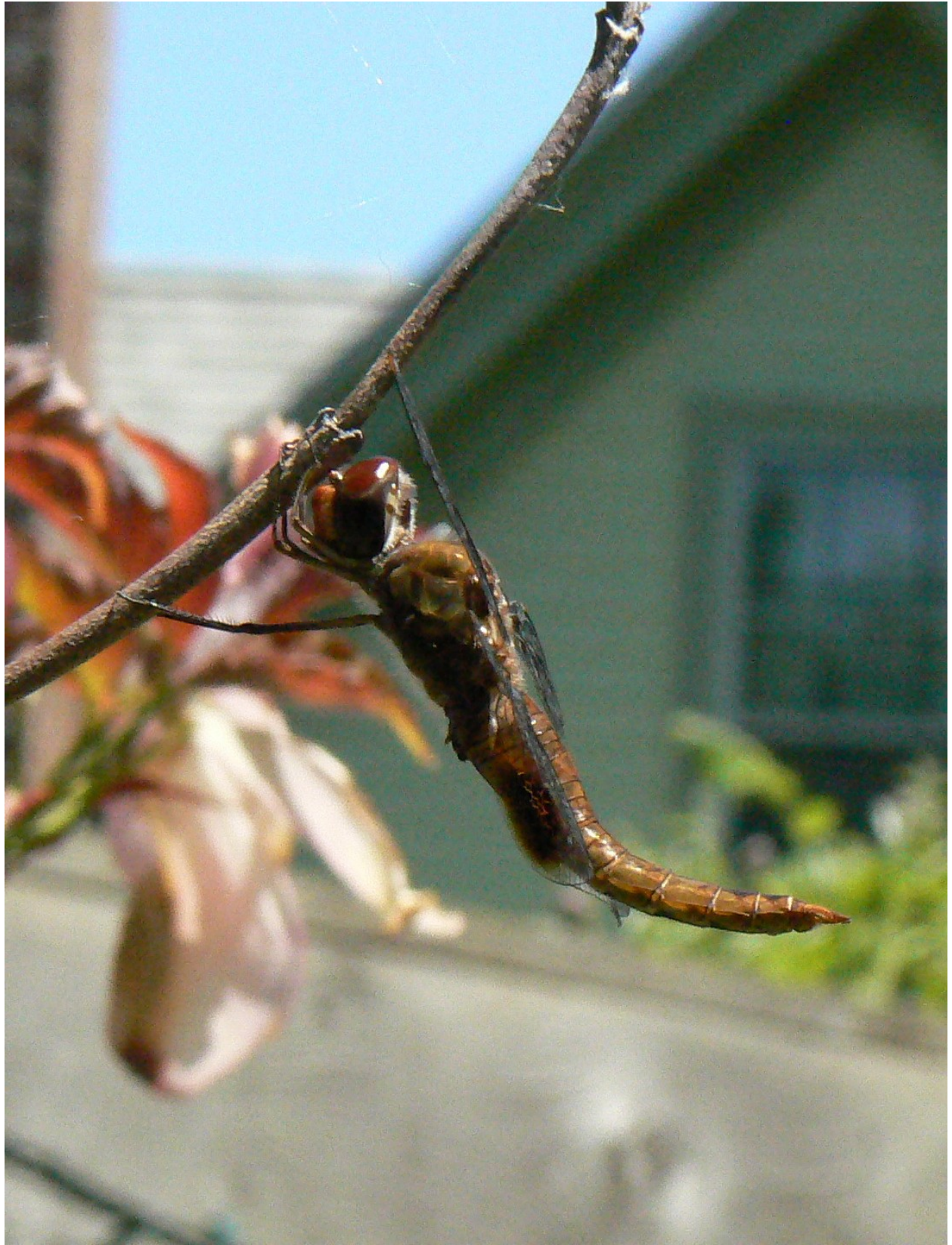
I think the key to creating a beautiful and balanced habitat is to draw from the great collection of regionally specific wild plants, as well as what I refer to as very well-behaved flowering and fruiting ornamentals. The peach tree is an example of a very well-behaved non-native tree. The fruit and flower are like none other, and songbirds, Baltimore orioles for example, follow the blossoming of orchard fruits on their northward migration. And, of equal importance, we don't find peach trees invasively sprouting in every meadow. Asiatic magnolias are a family of very well-behaved ornamentals. To my knowledge, none of the Asian species of magnolias and the hybrid crosses between them and the North American species have invaded our woodlands. The flowers, foliage and bark provide four seasons of beauty and the songbirds tending our garden gobble the brilliantly colored fruits.

In defense of lilacs, occasionally one must dig a little deeper to find their true value in a landscape designed for people and wild creatures. First and foremost a garden should be an inviting habitat for the people who dwell there. What better way to create an invitation than with the beauty and fragrance of the lilac? Although not native to North America, lilacs (*Syringa vulgaris*) are celebrated in this country, as they are part of our cultural heritage. From cuttings tucked into belongings, the earliest settlers connected their previous home to their home of new beginnings. The ease in which lilacs are cultivated is famous and testifies to their success and popularity. At the lecture, an example of a white oak, which supports nearly one hundred species of Lepidoptera, was compared to the lilac, which is known to support just twenty-five. From a gardener's perspective, that is like comparing apples to oranges. Very few have space enough to grow an 80-foot-tall white oak, whereas a ten-foot-tall and easily cultivated lilac can find a place in nearly any garden. Besides, twenty-five species of Lepidoptera is not bad, especially when compared to the native eastern redbud that—although is quite stunning and provides nectar for migrating hummingbirds—is much more challenging to cultivate and hosts just two species.

So don't go ripping out the lilacs. Plant what you like, as long as it is not invasive. As much as possible, utilize native plants in your garden design and combine with well-investigated and well-behaved ornamentals.

End Note: Tall coneflower (*Rudbeckia laciniata* 'Autumn Sun') is available at Goose Cove Gardens.

Kim Smith is an interior and garden designer. Preorders for her forthcoming book *Oh Garden of Fresh Possibilities! ~ Notes from a Gloucester Garden*, September 2008, are available through her website at www.kimsmithdesigns.com and Toad Hall Bookstore at www.toadhallbooks.org. Kim will be happy to respond to readers' questions and comments at kimsmithdesigns@hotmail.com.





Spot-winged Glider (Pantala hymenaea)