

## *An American Lady (Vanessa virginiensis)*

By Kim Smith

Imagine my surprise and delight in encountering this newly emerged beauty nectaring in our garden on a sunny day in early *November*. She stayed the afternoon, earnestly probing the newly opened florets of the Korean daisy blossoms. Generally speaking, we can assume that when a butterfly is in as pristine condition as she, it has recently emerged, or eclosed. But from where had she come? This was by far the latest we had ever seen an American Lady in our garden, or local meadow for that matter. Perhaps because last year we planted pussytoes, one of several of the caterpillars' host plants, and now have a great patch of it. For whatever reason, I was glad to see her.

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Arthropoda

Class: Insecta

Order: Lepidoptera

Family: Nymphalidae

Genus: *Vanessa*

Species: *virginiensis*

The American Lady butterfly (*Vanessa virginiensis*) is often mistaken for the Painted Lady (*Vanessa cardui*). Painted Ladies are holarctic (found throughout the northern hemisphere of Eurasia and North America); American Ladies are found in the western hemisphere from southern Canada to Venezuela. The simplest way to differentiate the two is by observing the ventral (underside) hindwings. Painted Ladies have five spots along the wing margin (four small and one very small) whereas American Ladies have two comparatively larger blue-centered 'eyespot.' Several different families of Lepidoptera bear eyespot patterns on their wings. Eyespots are thought to resemble the eyes of vertebrates and are an example of how animals have evolved to mimic other animals in order to confuse predators. The higher the internal contrast, as well as the contrast between the concentric circles and the background, the lesser the risk of predation.

I am frequently asked (especially by children) where do butterflies live during the winter. Different species differ in their habits, and some species exhibit several methods of surviving cold winter temperatures. We are familiar with butterflies that migrate to warmer climates—Red Admirals and Monarchs, for example. In late summer newly hatched caterpillars of the Great Spangled Fritillary butterfly nestle into leaf litter near violet plants. In early spring the awakening caterpillar feeds on the freshly emerging shoots of violets. Question Mark and Mourning Cloak butterflies both hibernate and migrate to warmer climates. The overwintering adults reside in various hide-a-ways such as the sheltering nooks and chinks of bark. Hibernating adult Mourning Cloaks have been observed emerging as early as February to feed briefly on sap. Painted Ladies migrate, as do other *Vanessa* butterflies. American Ladies are a bit of a mystery. Able to withstand colder temperatures than other members of its family, American Ladies are the hardiest of the *Vanessa* butterflies. It is believed some migrate and some spend the winter sheltered in natural overwintering sites such as the loose bark of tree crevices and the eaves of homes.

Two favorite larval host plants of the American Lady caterpillars that grow beautifully in our region are plantain-leaved pussytoes (*Antennaria plantaginifolia*) and pearly everlasting (*Anaphalis margaritacea*). Pussytoes are a low growing and moderately fast spreading ground cover for shade, with smooth-edged oval leaves and kitten paw-like blossoms. A member of the aster family, pearly everlasting grows naturally in dry fields and along roadsides. White petal-like bracts surround the diminutive yellow flowers. Pearly everlasting grows approximately two feet in height and blooms from June to September. The foliage is silvery and woolly, making it an attractive plant for the garden both in and out of flower.

I often plant Korean daisies (*Chrysanthemum x koreana* 'Single Apricot') in my clients' gardens. I let them know at the outset of its untidy habit. How does a bit of unruly behavior compare to masses and masses of gorgeous apricot pink daisies in bloom from mid-October to mid-November, providing nectar for pollinators of all sorts? Would they prefer the ubiquitous blobs of greenhouse grown mums? With nothing to lose and everything to gain (I freely give the daisies from my garden), if they don't like it, they can pass it along. Upon seeing the great collection of butterflies and bees attracted, they all fall in love and, as do I, forgive its wildy ways.

*Kim Smith Designs* is an interior and garden design firm. Kim's first book *Oh Garden of Fresh Possibilities!* (David R. Godine, Publisher, 2009), which she wrote and illustrated, is available through your local bookseller and Barnes and Noble. She will be happy to respond to questions and comments at [kimsmithdesigns@hotmail.com](mailto:kimsmithdesigns@hotmail.com). For more information about *Oh Garden of Fresh Possibilities!*, butterfly gardening, current projects, exhibits, and events, please visit her website at [www.kimsmithdesigns.com](http://www.kimsmithdesigns.com).



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