

Gardening to save our native butterflies

Jan Miller

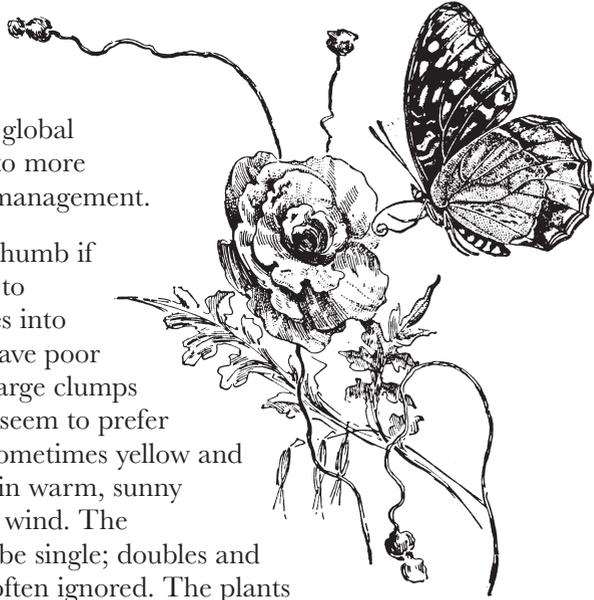
Everyone loves butterflies; they are the movement-and-dance overture of the constantly changing colour show in our summer gardens. But the sad fact is that they are dying out, even ones that used to be common ten years ago. Of the approximately 60 species of native British butterflies, more than half are under threat and restricted to a handful of localities. Habitat destruction is the main cause; well-intended but intensive farming encouraged after the last war has meant the disappearance of many wild plants that butterflies relied on for caterpillar food. Building development has meant what natural habitat does remain is in isolated, distanced 'islands', and most butterflies can't fly more than a few miles from where they hatch. Most also need very specific plants on which to lay their eggs. This was an advantage until mankind interfered, as the different species wouldn't compete with each other. Butterflies are also very dependent on local weather patterns; if it rains for days when the adults emerge from their pupae, they can't dry out their new wings and simply die.

Moths, closely related to butterflies, are not generally as popular, but many are just as beautiful though rarely appreciated because they fly at night. Moths have the most poetic names, given by the Victorian enthusiasts who first used light traps to be able to see them. Names like 'Scarce Vapourer', 'Rosy Footman' and 'Flame Brocade' are all very descriptive, but some obviously frustrated their would-be identifiers - 'The Confused' and 'The Cryptic' are names that can still be found in the reference books!

Butterflies and moths are only the tip of the iceberg; if we conserve habitat for them we also conserve it for other insects, and that means food for our wild birds, bats and small mammals that are also becoming scarce. Our own gardens could provide a lifeline to both. By providing nectar-rich plants for the adults to sip from and food plant leaves for their caterpillars, we can give 'island-hopping' butterflies and moths the means to get to a new habitat and spread again.

Encouragingly, a few species are actually increasing their range at present - probably due to global warming, but also partly to more sympathetic countryside management.

There are a few rules of thumb if you want to grow flowers to encourage more butterflies into your garden. Butterflies have poor sight, so are attracted to large clumps of the same flower. They seem to prefer purples, deep pinks and sometimes yellow and white. They need to feed in warm, sunny places, sheltered from the wind. The individual flowers should be single; doubles and other fancy cultivars are often ignored. The plants need to be well watered in times of drought so that enough runny nectar is produced, and of course, there can't be any spraying of insecticides!



Most people know about buddleia - often called the butterfly bush - for attracting lots of butterflies in late summer. But in fact, if you look, you will see that they are always the same five or six species – Red Admiral, Painted Lady (both of which are immigrants each year from the continent), Large (or ‘Cabbage’) White, Small Tortoiseshell, Comma and Peacock. Luckily for us, these are some of the most attractive butterflies, and ones that regularly visit gardens. But what about the fifty or more other species of native butterflies? Where do they live, what do they feed on? Some are so specialised, and now so rare, that they will hardly ever come into your garden. But if you are lucky enough to live near a wild area where some of these rarer species breed, you may just attract them by growing their favourite plants.

For many moths the main requirement is that the flowers open and are scented at night (they have evolved to be pollinated by moths). This is also good news for us who in recent years have started using the patio and garden lighting to sit out with our gin and tonic in the evening, and can

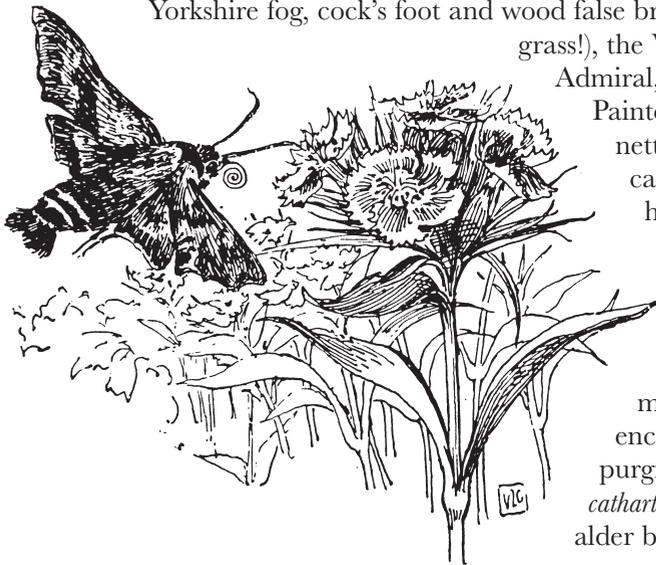
now enjoy these night-scented flowers ourselves! There are relatively few of these, but good ones for the garden are: Nottingham catchfly, bladder campion, evening primrose (*Oenothera* spp.), honeysuckle (*Lonicera periclymen*), night-scented stocks, petunias, sweet rocket (*Hesperis matronalis*), tobacco plant (*Nicotiana*, especially pale coloured varieties), and white jasmine.

Other popular nectar plants often grown in our gardens include the ice plant (*Sedum spectabile*), lavender (especially 'Munstead'), michelmas daisy, marjoram (*Origanum vulgare*), *Aubretia*, red valerian, french marigolds, *Hebe* (especially 'Great Orme' and 'Midsummer Beauty'), and candytuft. The exciting thing is, if you grow the plants that butterflies and moths must have to lay their eggs on, you may help them to increase!

When we come to the plants on which the caterpillars have to feed, we find quite a different list, however, and very few of these are currently grown in gardens. But many of them are attractive in their own right and could be used in planting schemes, with a little thought. Butterflies and moths share many of the same caterpillar or 'larval' food plant species, although many moths also rely on our native trees, especially oak, beech, willows, sallows and aspens as well as buckthorn and hawthorn in the hedges. Butterflies within the same family tend to like one particular larval food-plant; the Browns and the Skippers need various native grasses like Yorkshire fog, cock's foot and wood false broom (NOT Italian rye

grass!), the Vanessids (including Red Admiral, Small Tortoiseshell and Painted Lady) need stinging nettles, the whites need the cabbage family, including honesty, cuckoo flower, nasturtiums; and grow garlic mustard for Orange Tips.

Other species have more individual preferences; the Brimstone needs purging buckthorn (*Rhamnus catharticus*) on limey soils or alder buckthorn (*Frangula alnus*)



on wet, acid soils. The Brimstone is possibly the origin of our word 'butterfly' as it was the first 'butter-coloured fly' that would be seen in spring. It is common in England but scarce in North Wales, probably because the buckthorn was not traditionally used for farm hedging here. It is also one of our butterflies that can fly further - up to fifteen miles searching for a buckthorn shrub in a sunny spot on which to lay its eggs. So if we could all plant just one of these buckthorn (note that it is NOT the same as sea buckthorn) in our gardens we might draw this gorgeous yellow creature across from England!

Bird's foot trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*) is needed by many blue butterflies and moths, as well as holly and ivy for the Holly Blue. Sorrel or dock is eaten by the Small Copper caterpillar, and elm is needed for the White Letter Hairstreak. (This butterfly is now rare, but surviving on wych elm since Dutch elm disease hit). The Hawkmoths like various *Epilobium* species, including rosebay willowherb for the eccentrically camouflaged Elephant Hawkmoth.

With the exception of a big enough patch of nettles, all these plants could happily be incorporated into today's garden. Research has found that to attract egg laying, a nettle patch has to be at least 6ft square, and in full sun most of the day without overhanging branches (on which birds can perch to pick them off), and also sheltered from strong winds. Perhaps the councils who are thoughtfully planting our road verges with wild flowers should be encouraged to allow nettles too.

To encourage more butterflies and moths you could have around the edge of your garden a mixed hedge of native trees, as well as large hebes, golden privet (which when allowed to flower, provides wonderful scent as well as winter-hardy foliage) and buddleias - whose flowering season may be extended by growing different varieties like 'B. *globosa*' for early, B. *weyeriana* 'Golden Glow' for July to November and 'Beijing' for late flowering. Buddleias can also be fooled into flowering later by cutting them back hard later than the usually recommended March.

You could have the lovely golden hop and honeysuckle twining through your hedge (avoid many of the cultivated types of honeysuckle - they have no scent. It is best to stick to the wild species which is gorgeous anyway). Ivy in the hedge will provide some of the only available nectar

late and early in the year, and is invaluable for hibernating adults. The herbaceous border could have drifts of marjoram, French marigolds, hebes and lavender in high summer and hemp agrimony (*Eupatorium*), *Sedum spectabile* and michelmas daisies for autumn flowers, with bird's foot trefoil as an ideal edging plant, as it doesn't like being overshadowed. Honesty makes lovely purple clumps very early in the year and attracts the first butterflies. Some plants can be pulled out after flowering to make room for summer flowers, but leave enough for a show of 'silver penny' pods in autumn and winter. Tall, architectural plants for the back of a border can include teasel (also attracting goldfinches coming for the seed in autumn) as well as some of the spectacular thistles like the musk thistle (*Carduus nutans*).

The rockery or walls could have all the little dry, low-growing, limestone-loving plants like bird's foot trefoil, aubretia, rock rose, thymes, alyssum, candytuft, rest-harrow and dog violets. The pond or bog-garden could have water mint, cuckoo flower (*Cardamine pratensis*), devil's bit scabious (*Succisa pratensis*), hemp agrimony and purple loosestrife. Cotton grass and purple moor grass would be a boon for several rare species in boggy areas. And part of the lawn, allowed to grow longer as a wildflower meadow for most of the summer, could include knapweed, scabious, sheep's sorrel, clover, cranesbill, black medick, crucifers like dame's violet and garlic mustard, lady's bedstraw, kidney vetch and wild grasses.

Lastly, don't forget the vegetable patch and fruit trees. We have to get used to the idea of being happy to see caterpillars on our cabbages! Some could be transferred to the nasturtiums you're growing in other parts of the garden. And do leave a few apples rotting under the fruit tree in autumn, as this will delight many late adult butterflies. Growing all these plants won't automatically mean that you will get the rarer butterflies in your garden, but if thousands of us are doing it all over the country, we may stand a chance. To find out more, and to buy many butterfly and moth-attracting plants, go to: www.northwalesbutterflies.org.uk

Jan Miller is a volunteer for Butterfly Conservation North Wales Branch, and designer of community butterfly gardens that have won first prize in Britain in Bloom, Wales in Bloom and the Snowdonia Wildlife Gardening competition. Her book 'Gardening for Butterflies, Bees and other Beneficial Insects' can be ordered online at www.7wells.co.uk