

Ask Your Environmental Commissioner: Why Do we Need to Protect Our Butterflies

By Jody Sackett, Rumson Environmental Commission

We all love seeing those delicate butterflies flutter around our yards. Not just eye candy, they are also phenomenal pollinators and essential to the ecosystem. There are over 160,000 species of butterflies and moths, in all shapes and sizes, ranging from the giant Queen Alexandra's Birdwing butterflies with one-foot wingspans to the tiny Western Pygmy Blue that's barely visible with its half-inch wingspan.

Our own local butterflies include the Monarch and common black swallowtail butterfly, which is the NJ state butterfly. Most active during the day, they enhance our gardens by flying around drinking flower nectar and pollinating the plants. Alas, both species are declining due to pesticide and herbicide use, habitat loss, and climate change. Just this year, Monarch butterflies were declared an endangered species. But we can help the little butterflies, and here's a few simple ways to protect them.

Water please! Butterflies need water, and we can easily provide it for them. While butterflies like birdbath water, they don't want to be gobbled up by a bird while they're there. A better idea is to give them their own water source by simply placing a large saucer on the ground, and putting a few stones or a floating piece of wood in it. That provides a platform for the butterflies to rest on when they come for a drink. Misting from lawn sprinklers is good too. You can also make them a "waterless pond" by simply digging a small shallow hole and lining it with plastic, then filling the lined hole with rocks. The morning dew will collect on the rocks, which is enough for the butterflies to drink.

Migration Season's Here. While not all butterflies migrate, the most famous is undoubtedly the astounding Monarch. Fat caterpillars, who grew from tiny whitish eggs laid on milkweed, emerge from their cocoons in late summer as gorgeous butterflies, ready by fall to start flying 2500 miles south to central Mexico or California. Autumn is peak migration season, so look for dozens of them flying through our coastal Migration Corridor, perhaps enjoying seaside goldenrod nectar. Keep an eye out for them again in spring when the Monarchs (descendants of the original migrants) will make their spectacular return to our shores.

Create a Butterfly Waystation. Migration is a long road, so why not help the butterflies a bit. By planting native trees, shrubs, and flowers in your yard or even just patio pots, you'll create a "waystation" or rest stop for the migrants and also attract local butterflies too. The flowers provide nectar to hungry butterflies who pause for a rest and snack along their route. It's also a safe habitat, and native plants like butterfly weed not only produce delightful orange flowers but also provide an ideal spot for Monarchs to lay their eggs. Visit www.rumsonnj.gov/env/native-plants to learn more and see photos of beautiful native flowers. You can also build butterfly boxes as shelter for our flapping friends in your waystation. These are similar to a birdhouse but have slits where butterflies can tuck in for protection. No matter the size, have your butterfly waystation officially designated as a Certified Wildlife Habitat at <https://www.nwf.org/certify>.

No Bug Sprays or Bug Zappers Please. Pesticides kill insects, and what do you think a butterfly is? Chemicals kill targeted bugs but also non-target ones like our butterfly friends, so instead of chemically killing them, use organic pest controls like eucalyptus and citrus essential oils, and plant natural deterrents like marigold. Bug Zappers are not effective in killing mosquitoes but are great at killing other useful flying bugs and pollinators, so please turn them off and protect our butterfly friends.

It doesn't take much effort to help protect our local butterflies, but it's well worth it - and the widespread benefits will last a long time.