

Find Pleasure in Your Garden

By Susan Camp

July was a miserably hot month in Gloucester County, and August and September temperatures promise to be high, too. As uncomfortable as the summer has been for us, we have escaped the broiling heat, wildfires, torrential rains, tornadoes, and other terrifying events that have affected much of the nation for weeks. Every day we view videos and photos on the internet and TV of the results of weeks of unyielding heat and severe storms. Seeing all that destruction and despair can be disheartening, which is why I have chosen to focus on positive occurrences in our garden and woods this summer.

Jim and I spend most summer evenings outside in our gazebo. In June, I noticed a significant increase in the number of nocturnal winged beetles we call lightning bugs or fireflies entertaining us with their nightly light show. In 2017, I wrote a column about the decreasing numbers of lightning bugs in the United States and ways to attract and protect these harmless insects.

Since lightning bugs flash their signals to attract mates, too much lighting outside a home can interfere with mating. We have a few solar lights placed at intervals along the path to the house but otherwise avoid outdoor lighting whenever possible.

We have almost completely eliminated the use of pesticides, herbicides, and chemical fertilizers. Female lightning bugs lay their eggs on the ground, where they hatch within several weeks. The voracious larvae feed on slugs, snails, grubs, and worms and overwinter in underground burrows or beneath tree bark to emerge in the spring and pupate for one to two weeks before the adults emerge. We have no lawn around the house, only a strip of microclover, which rarely needs mowing, affording the developing eggs and larvae some protection. We also have many trees, including native pines, which shed pine straw where females can lay their eggs.

Several years ago, we planted bright orange butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*) in the front garden and in a raised bed in our field. That first summer we found three Monarch caterpillars, then just one or two each year since. Two weeks ago, I discovered a lovely Monarch female (*Danaus plexippus*) flitting around the butterfly weed. Last week, I was delighted to count 12 hungry caterpillars, which increased to 18 on a second count. They tend to hide under the leaves, so you have to look carefully to find them. They are munching furiously, and we will need to gently transport them to the butterfly weed growing in the field.

Next year, we will plant more butterfly weed and the pink or purple-flowered swamp milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*) and common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*).

My pleasure increased last Sunday afternoon when I saw that we have five black swallowtail (*Papilio polyxenes*) caterpillars devouring an overgrown fennel plant in the herb garden. Each spring, we plant fennel, dill, and parsley for the black swallowtail caterpillars.

Another butterfly we enjoy in the garden is the Eastern tiger swallowtail (*Papilio glaucus*), but the caterpillars feed on the leaves of the tulip poplar, wild black cherry, and sweet bay magnolia trees, so we rarely see them.

My favorite butterfly is the constantly moving zebra swallowtail (*Eurytides marcellus*), whose caterpillars feed on the leaves of the pawpaw tree. It is a delight to capture one on camera.

These butterflies and many others find their way to the garden where they join the bees to enjoy the nectar of the sweetly scented clethra, bee balm, mountain mint, Joe-Pye weed, and other perennials and shrubs.

The honeybees and many species of native bees in the garden are a pleasure to watch on a sunny afternoon, as they appear to search for the blossoms with the sweetest, tastiest nectar. Carpenter, mason, adrenid, and bumblebees join together in a seemingly joyous dance through the flowers and shrubs, often joined by a hummingbird or two.

Spend time watching the critters in your garden, and the world will seem very far away.

August 3, 2023