

Attracting Nature



Thelma Beaubien holds a leaf with a caterpillar while seated in the butterfly garden at her Waterloo home.



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Butterfly paradise lures winged visitors to Waterloo yard

BY HELEN LAMMERS-HELPS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TARA WEST

“Did you see what kind that was?” calls out Thelma Beaubien as she rushes past me with her camera in hand, hoping to get a photo of the latest winged visitor to her garden.

Beaubien’s garden is proof that if you create butterfly habitat, the fluttering beauties will find it.

In the 10 years since Beaubien dug up the grass in her front yard and replaced it with plants for butterflies, she has had almost 700 butterfly sightings and recorded 28 different species.

Beaubien started what she calls Beau’s Butterfly Garden as a retirement project. An amateur nature photographer, she’d been in the habit of getting up early and driving to conservation areas that were off the beaten track to take pictures.

“I wanted to bring nature to my doorstep instead of travelling to conservation areas for photography,” she says. A longtime gardener, she has also found garden design to be a form of artistic expression.

The front yard was the logical location for the project. Butterflies are cold-blooded

and need a lot of sun to be active, so the shady backyard wasn’t a good choice. A maple tree was removed from the front yard to increase the sun exposure.

The garden has evolved over the decade as Beaubien noted which plants are more attractive to the butterflies. “I began to garden through the eyes of a butterfly,” she says.

These days there are more than 70 plants in the 14.5-by-8.5-metre garden.

Even with a garden that fills her front yard, Beaubien says it’s necessary to concentrate on providing the right host and nectar plants for a selection of butterflies. She has chosen to focus on monarchs, giant swallowtail, black swallowtail, American lady and wild indigo duskywing.

“Each species of female butterfly has a specific host plant that they will lay their eggs on,” Beaubien explains.

For example, monarchs will only lay eggs on milkweed, and “the monarch is starving for milkweed as too many of the common milkweed plants have been destroyed.”

Beaubien planted four types of milkweed in the middle of the garden. “I find they lay more eggs when milkweeds are clustered together,” she says.

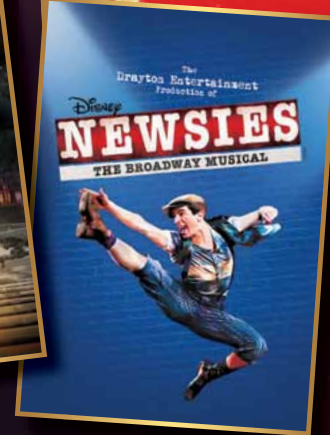
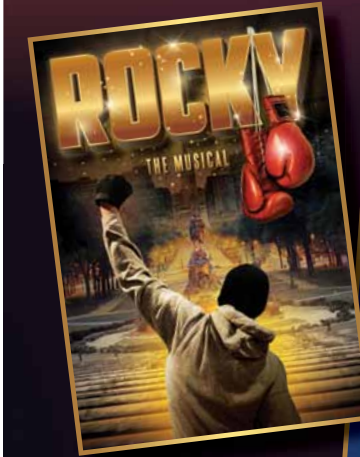
She has also noticed that swamp milkweed (*Asclepias incarnate*) has had the greatest number of monarch eggs and caterpillars. It is a clumping form that doesn’t spread by underground tap roots the way common milkweed does.

The brightly coloured flowers of annual non-native tropical milkweed are a wonderful accent to any garden, she says.

Along the picket fence at the back of the garden is what Beaubien refers to as the swallowtail salad bar, an area filled with swallowtail host plants: dill, parsley, fennel and rue.

Adult butterflies require nourishment


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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: A monarch butterfly visits a Mexican sunflower; native bee balm attracts a Milbert's tortoiseshell butterfly (also seen on page 52); a zinnia in bloom; and globe thistle in centre.

from nectar, a sugar-rich liquid found in both native and non-native plants, Beaubien says.

Her best annual nectar plant is the non-native *Verbena bonariensis*, which grows to a metre tall and blooms continuously until late autumn. Locating the plant in an area where the blooms rise above other plants provides good accessibility for the butterflies, Beaubien says.

Her many types of coneflower (echinacea) are reliable nectar sources for a number of species. "The shape of the 'coned' centre is a good landing platform for the butterflies," she says.

Zinnias, annuals that provide season-long blooms, are another must-have. After noticing in the fall of 2017 that zinnias were a particularly good source of nectar for the monarch super generation – the one that flies to Mexico to overwinter – she planted even more zinnias in 2018. Zinnias are available in a range of colours and heights from 30 to 91 centimetres.

Butterflies are attracted by colourful flowers. They smell with the scent-detecting sensors at the ends of their antennae and they taste the nectar with the bottoms of their feet. Their long proboscis is used to obtain the nectar.

As an avid gardener and photographer, Beaubien gives careful consideration to the location of plants according to their height, colour and bloom period.

To keep costs down, she has grown many of the plants from seed. Friends also shared plants from their gardens.

The success of any garden is dependent on good soil, says Beaubien. Before planting anything she added several bags of Triple Mix (a rich topsoil mixed with compost) and rototilled it into the soil to a depth of 15 to 20 centimetres.

Baubien's garden is a labour of love. In addition to weekly dead heading (removing old blooms) to encourage repeat blooming, she applies compost in the spring to enrich the soil and provide nutrients. A shallow dish of wet mulch

serves as a water station for the butterflies.

In the fall of 2017, she added pathways, which made it possible for her to get closer to butterflies and other beneficial insects. Twice a day she walks through the garden with her journal in hand. She records species, number of butterflies and notes any particular flower that most attracts the butterflies.

Baubien submits her observations to e-butterfly.org, an online database of butterfly observations that collects data on butterfly abundance, distribution and phenology across North America. Beaubien's reports are contributing to an improved scientific understanding of butterfly populations and distributions. Once verified, this information becomes part of the Ontario Butterfly Atlas.

On average, she records about 160 butterflies per year, but the number varies because butterfly activity is highly dependent on weather.

Baubien has recorded as many as seven different species of butterflies visiting the garden in one day. Two rare species, fiery skipper and variegated fritillary, and two uncommon species, silver-spotted skipper and banded hair-streak, are new sightings for Beaubien's location on the Ontario Butterfly Atlas map.

Her camera is a valuable tool in identifying species. "Butterflies move quickly and having a photograph assists in identifying the species later on," she says.

Her stunning photos also make her a popular speaker at area horticultural clubs. To date, more than 1,000 people have attended her presentations. In 2016, she also documented her experience in a self-published book, "Gardening for Butterflies: Attracting, rescuing and raising butterflies."

Beau's Butterfly Garden has been




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registered as an official monarch waystation by Monarch Watch, a non-profit education and conservation organization based at the University of Kansas. This means it provides the resources necessary for monarch breeding to produce successive generations and sustain them on their long journey to their overwintering grounds in Mexico.

Caterpillars have many predators, so to help them survive to adulthood, Beaubien raises butterflies in captivity. She's most proud of the 38 swallowtail eggs she found on her gas plant and raised to adulthood.


Her interests extend to other types of pollinators and insects. "It's a buggy property and I'm a buggy lady," she says. She has been taking pictures of the many types of native bees in her garden with plans to identify them when she has more time.

"Adding native plants to our gardens attracts a diversity of butterfly species plus many other important pollinators and fascinating insects. This is needed now more than ever in our ever-growing cities," she says.

Beau's Butterfly Garden is also a teaching garden. Beaubien created signs to identify host plants and butterflies in the garden, which is a popular tour stop for local garden clubs. "Neighbours stop to read the signs too," she says.

She has also dedicated many hours to helping others identify butterflies and raise caterpillars, but she admits there is a limit to how many people she can assist with this time-consuming process.

Alan Macnaughton, a Kitchener butterfly hobbyist and vice-president of the Toronto Entomologists' Association, has high praise for Beaubien's garden. "I think this sort of public education is a wonderful contribution and I don't know who else is doing this," he says.

The association has members all across Ontario, and Macnaughton says many have become interested in butterflies and joined the association as a result of Beaubien's efforts. 

THELMA BEAUBIEN'S TIPS FOR CREATING A BUTTERFLY GARDEN

- Choose a location where the garden will get at least six hours of sun.
- Plant several types of flowers (native and non-native) for a greater diversity of pollinators.
- When purchasing plants, use botanical names since common names may refer to more than one type of plant, causing confusion.
- Deadhead flowers for repeat blooms.

BEAUBIEN'S FAVOURITE PLANTS INCLUDE:

Mexican sunflower (*Tithonia rotundifolia*)

Goldenrod (*Solidago*)

Asters such as New England aster (*Symphyotrichum novae-angliae*)

Purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*)

Meadow blazing star (*Liatris ligulistylis*): Monarchs love its nectar but it can be difficult to grow.

Butterfly bush (*Buddleia davidii*)

Verbena bonariensis: a non-native nectar plant

Milkweed: There are four kinds: swamp milkweed (*Asclepias incarnate*), butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*) and the non-native tropical milkweed (*Asclepias curassavica*).

Zinnia: A non-native annual providing blooms all season long

RESOURCES

Beaubien's book, "Gardening for Butterflies: Attracting, Rescuing and Raising Butterflies," is an excellent resource with many photographs detailing her experience. Available at the Cambridge Butterfly Conservatory.

Ontario Butterfly Atlas online map: ontarioinsects.org/atlas_online.htm

Monarch Watch: monarchwatch.org

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