

Once upon a time.....

It was time for another bedtime story for Zoe, and as often was the case, I was stumped for an original storyline of no more than 5 minutes, but that I could drag out to 10 or 15, as necessary. "Ok, Zoe, time for bed." Zoe and the dog bounded upstairs and into bed and waited not so patiently for me to begin the evening story."

"So, once upon a time a caterpillar and a toad took a stroll through the garden looking for something to eat. A Goldfinch perched on a fencepost observing them..." I began (not sure where the story was going).

"What do caterpillars and toads eat?" Zoe interrupted.

"Um, caterpillars eat plants and toads eat insects," I explained, "both of which are in the garden."

"What plant is the caterpillar looking for? A vegetable or a pretty flower?" Leave it to a 7-year old to want the details.

"That's a good question, Zoe, because it depends upon what kind of a caterpillar it is. Caterpillars, like many insects, will only eat certain plants. They will seek out plants that they have evolved to eat, so although that caterpillar walking through the garden is surrounded by many green plants, it's looking for a specific one. It doesn't even recognize the others as food."

"What if doesn't find that one plant?" she asked.

"Well, then it dies." The harsh reality of the natural world rears its ugly head.

"Oh, that's awful. Why don't we plant what it eats?" a logical question for a child.

"Because people don't want caterpillars and other insects to eat their plants" I explained. "So we deliberately plant what caterpillars won't eat. We plant things that were grown in other countries for example, so that our caterpillars don't see them as a source for dinner. But if we planted what we call native plants, plants that have grown in our environment for millions of years along with the caterpillars, the chances are much greater that the caterpillar will find dinner."

"But then the caterpillar will eat all your native plants." She quickly observed.

"Not necessarily." Here was my opening to get back to the story. "Remember that Goldfinch on the fencepost? Well, that Goldfinch will feed the caterpillar to it's babies."

"Goldfinches eat seeds from our feeders." A smart retort I thought.

"Yes, but they feed their babies insects, and caterpillars are a great source of protein for young birds. Actually, much of wildlife depends directly or indirectly upon protein from caterpillars and other insects. Like that toad. So if insects can't find food, then birds and toads and other reptiles won't find enough

food either. And if they don't find food, then the fox you see in our garden sometimes won't find dinner. It's like links in a chain, Zoe, if one breaks it affects them all."

"Is that why they call it a food-chain?" I wondered where she heard that term.

"Yes, it's a delicate balance to keep all the links in place. You start with energy from the sun that a plant turns into chlorophyll so it can grow, and insects take the energy from the plant by eating its leaves, and birds and reptiles that get energy by eating insects, and then small mammals that eat them, and so on it goes. When the system's in balance it works wonderfully and everybody has enough to eat. But when the insects can't find the plants they need, the whole thing breaks down. So the more native and diverse the plants we have in our gardens, the more likely we are to keep our environment healthy and in balance."

I waited for a response. Zoe and the dog were sound asleep. Just as well, I never knew where my bedtime story was going anyway.