

Zoe's Story continues.....

The phone interrupted my breakfast. It was Zoe's second grade teacher; and after some cordial comments, she got to the point. "Zoe told the class a story about a caterpillar that starved to death in your garden because it couldn't find anything to eat. It seems all your plants are 'aliens'. The kids wondered what planet the plants came from and how they got here and so on. Their conversation rocketed off course from there—you can imagine. I'm sure there was some other message in that story, but...."

I interrupted before she could go further, "Zoe got the story a little wrong; and yes, there is a moral that apparently was lost in the retelling. The point I wanted to make was that it's the choices we make in our own gardens that can determine the diversity of life in our own yards and our town and our planet, and therefore, what species survive and which are left to go extinct. 'Alien' plants are simply those non-native species that our local wildlife has not adapted to for food and other specific needs within their lifecycle. We've all heard that loss of habitat, usually resulting from increased development and alteration of our naturalized areas, is the reason for the negative impact to populations of various species and sometimes the demise of species. The point of the story is that we should be mindful that what we plant in our own backyards can be a help to sustaining our local ecology. If we reduce the availability of native plants, our native insect populations are impacted which then reduces the availability of important food sources for birds - as an example."

I paused, hoping she was still on the line. Finally she said, "As long as I have the kids' attention, sounds like a teachable moment for my class. Can you give me some for instances - maybe this will work into a lesson plan - insects are always an attention grabber."

"Well, what I find really interesting are some of the recognizable insects and their life cycles and how they depend on certain plants native to our area. The Monarch Butterfly, for example, would not exist without the lowly milkweed--they lay their eggs *only* on milkweed plants which sustains the larva. This is a more common scenario than most of us think - that insects have specific relationships with certain plants. The insect and the plant have evolved together over millions of years; and it's their compatible chemistries that cause the caterpillar of the monarch to only recognize one plant as food—it simply can't digest any other plant. Humans are similar. Cucumber leaves, for example, will kill you if you make a few meals of them. There are many such examples, and we usually avoid such plants because they taste so bad to us—we don't think of them as food. So it is with insects."

"What about the butterfly bush that is often promoted by nurseries to attract butterflies for its nectar?" she asked getting us back on track.

"Good question. The butterfly bush, which is *not* a native by the way, is a source of food for the adult butterfly. But first you need the "nursery" where the caterpillar can grow into the butterfly, and that's the importance of the native milkweed plant in the monarch's case. It plays the critical role in its life cycle. So if we want butterflies in our future, we have to replace their habitats with these native plants. I can probably provide you with some other examples...."

“You know, I'd like to do better in my yard too. I love to garden, but not always sure on what is native. Any suggestions?”

Another teachable moment! With delight I replied, “Yes! There's this great book I highly recommend on this subject. It's called [Bringing Nature Home](#) by Douglas Tallamy. It's easy to read, has great photographs and lots of information. For a list of native species for Cape Cod, contact the conservation office or the Cape Cod Cooperative Extension or go to the conservation page of the Town of Chatham website. And let me know if how you make out with your butterfly lesson.”

Conversation done. I got back to my breakfast, being thankful that we humans had evolved to enjoy all the fruit staring back at me from the bowl.