Greening your yard with native species is good for the environment—and the critters.

The Joys of Growing Native Shrubs and Vines

Story and Photos
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The native red honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*) vine produces clusters of brilliant, scarlet-colored blossoms in the spring and fall.

Want to attract butterflies and other wildlife to your garden with beautiful and easy to maintain plants? Read on.

I have grown native Illinois shrubs and vines and studied them for several decades. Because these species are native, they are already adapted to Illinois' climate, requiring little care beyond the initial planting and establishment watering. Some of these plant species are the sole foodplant for caterpillars of certain butterfly species. Therefore, if you plant them, it is quite possible that you may attract those specific butterflies to your yard.

Our native insects, including caterpillars, can't or won't eat the foliage of most of the non-native plants that many of us grow. One would think that is a good thing, but actually hungry caterpillars generally don't injure the plant (unless it is very small). There are plenty of predators to eat the caterpillars, such as many songbird species which rely heavily on caterpillars for nestling food. If you grow mostly non-native plants, then there will be few caterpillars in your yard, and consequently few nesting songbirds. Essentially, your yard will be biologically sterile. At the very least, by planting native species you enable many more species to live in your neighborhood and thus enhance biodiversity. A diverse plant community, such as a woodland or neighborhood that contains many species, ulti-

Mature spicebush swallowtail caterpillars feed on their namesake plant and have false eyespots which are used in defense.

The golden-yellow cast of fall pawpaw (*Asimina triloba*) leaves color the understory of shady, moist-soil habitats.

mately makes a difference toward slowing extinction rates.

The first species of interest is the hazelnut bush (*Corylus americana*), which needs full sun and average soil. It will grow to 10-15 feet tall in about as many years and is clump-forming. It has visual interest each of the four seasons in the landscape and indeed, landscape architects often incorporate this plant into their designs. It produces delicious nuts and beautiful yellow, orange and red foliage in the fall. Harvest the nuts when the outer husk (botanically called bracts) is half green and half brown, if you can beat the squirrels to them. It bears catkins all winter and into the spring. In the summer, spiny oakworm caterpillars eat its leaves (or oak leaves) and provides food for bird nestlings. I never have any squirrel problems with my yard hazelnuts, but my neighbors and I have several species of large oaks and walnuts that provide ample nuts.

The spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*) has beautiful, yellow leaves and attractive red fruits in the fall for birds. Its leaves provide food for spicebush swallowtail and promethea moth caterpillars. An understory, and thus shade-loving, plant, the multi-stemmed bush grows to perhaps 15 feet tall and wide. Small, yellow flowers appear in the spring and the plant does best in a somewhat moist environment.

Leaves of the pawpaw (*Asimina triloba*) provide food for the zebra swallowtail and pawpaw sphinx moth caterpillars, which eat nothing else in Illinois; hence they occur only where pawpaws grow. Pawpaw fruits ripen in September in Illinois and have a rich, sweet, custardy taste for the humans and wildlife lucky enough to find one. A small understory tree, the pawpaw provides beautiful, golden fall color in shady, moist soil habitats (it will do fine in average soil). Pawpaws become clonal after a few years, creating a colony radiating out from the center parent tree.

Buttonbush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*) leaves are eaten by promethea moth larvae, as well as spicebush swallowtail caterpillars. The interesting, white, ball-like flowers are such compelling nectar sources that one may easily approach the tiger swallowtails or hummingbird clearwing moths as they feed from them. This shrub grows best in sun but will take a little shade. If watered, it will grow to 15 feet tall and wide. Buttonbush swamps provide habitat for the Illinois-endangered bird-voiced tree frog, but the bush will grow just fine in average soil.

Wafer ash or hop tree (*Ptelea trifoliata*) provides food via their leaves for the giant swallowtail caterpillar, which sits boldly atop the leaves, unafraid of being eaten by a bird since its tan and brown markings resemble a bird dropping. The only other foodplant this caterpillar eats in Illinois is the prickly ash (*Zanthoxylum americanum*). Both species are not true ashes and thus are not at risk for the emerald ash borer beetle that is slowly making its destructive way south throughout Illinois. Wafer ash seeds are a flat, wafer-shaped disc, persisting on the shrub into the

Promethea moth larvae, which feed on spicebush and buttonbush, have a colonial habit and display different color schemes in each growth stage.

Not a true ash, and therefore not susceptible to the emerald ash borer, the wafer ash (*Ptelea trifoliata*) tree produces wafer-shaped fruits that persist into winter.

winter. Its delicate, fragrant, white blossoms provide nectar for bees. This species grows in average soil in sun or shade, but blooms best in sun. It will grow to 20 feet tall with up to 4-inch diameter trunks.

Prairie willow (*Salix humilis*) is a sun-loving shrub that grows best in moist ground but does fine in average garden soil. It has delightful miniature catkins similar to the commercial pussy willow and grows to only 3 to 9 feet tall. Resembling bird droppings with their cream, brown and green coloration, viceroy butterfly (mimic of the monarch) caterpillars feed in plain sight without fear of becoming bird food.

Pipevine or Dutchman's pipe (*Aristolochia tomentosa*) has attractive, heart-shaped leaves and unusual burgundy and yellow flowers resembling a meerschaum pipe. Found in drier areas of Illinois twining up into the treetops or rambling across the ground, pipevines grow equally well in sun or deep shade. It suckers freely, which may be controlled via mowing. Its leaves provide food for the larva of the breath-taking pipevine swallowtail. The only other foodplant eaten in Illinois by the pipevine swallowtail caterpillar is Virginia snakeroot (*Aristolochia serpenteria*).

The red honeysuckle vine (*Lonicera sempervirens*) provides stunning clusters of scarlet blossoms spring and fall, semi-evergreen leaves, and is not invasive like its non-native cousin the Japanese honeysuckle. Grow this vine in a prominent spot in your yard as the flowers are so beautiful. Although the flowers are not fragrant, hummingbirds don't seem to notice as they sip nectar freely. Hummingbird sphinx larvae feast upon the leaves.

Illinois has two native species of passion flower vines, *Passiflora incarnata* and *Passiflora lutea*. The unusual and beautiful flowers are pollinated by bees. The first species, with larger white and blue flowers, is found in deep southern Illinois but will grow as far north as Hannibal, Missouri. The second species, with much smaller, pale-yellow flowers, is scattered throughout Illinois. The colorful caterpillar of the variegated fritillary butterfly feeds on passion flower leaves. These vines sucker vigorously, but can easily be controlled via mowing as needed. They grow to the top of my TV tower annually, dying back to the ground each winter. They are very late to sprout each year and in some years may not emerge from the ground until June or July. They require sun and average soil.

Growing native plants is immensely satisfying and fascinating, and you never know what new moth or butterfly may turn up next because of what you planted.

Plant a few and experiment with your yard.

Web sites

National Audubon Society Healthy Yard Pledge (tips on how to manage your back yard to help birds and other wildlife) http://audubonathome.org/pledge

Illinois Native Plant Society (useful links, invasive plant information and Illinois sources of native plants) http://www.ill-inps.org

Feeding on the distinctive heart-shaped leaves of the pipevine (*Aristolochia tomentos*) is the pipevine swallowtail caterpillar.