

Plant an Oak, Feed a Bluebird

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No, bluebirds haven't suddenly started eating acorns. Understanding the connection between them, though, will allow you to make plant selections for your landscape and garden that can actively impact your local ecosystem in a very positive way.

Although adult songbirds can eat seeds, fruits, and insects, 96% of land birds feed only soft bodied insects to their young. The majority of this food (75%) is caterpillars, which are the highly nutritious larvae of butterflies and moths. Many of these insects are specialists, meaning that they have specific needs as far as what plants they can eat. Typically, an insect lays its eggs on a plant that its larvae can eat. This will almost always be a native plant that it evolved with. This connection between insect and "host plant" (as the larval food plant is called) has evolved over eons and cannot be changed quickly. One of the more familiar examples of this type of host plant/insect connection is the milkweed family and the monarch. Although the adult monarch can nectar from multiple types of flowers, its larvae can only eat milkweeds. If there are no milkweeds, there are no baby monarchs.

Many of our landscaping plants are not native to our region. Therefore, they tend to be "pest free", meaning nothing here has evolved to eat them. While this keeps the plant from being chewed on, it does not provide larval food for our native butterflies and moths. Birds must then look elsewhere to feed their babies.

While we may look at a beautifully manicured lawn and foundation plantings and see lovely green space, an insect may see a food desert. Not all plants are created equal in a butterfly's eyes. With the alarming decline in numbers and diversity of insects, it makes sense to provide them with the plants that they can use for food. If you have a space in your landscape for a new plant—tree, shrub, vine, flower, or whatever fits—you can do your part for nature by making sure it is a plant that can DO good as well as LOOK good. You may even consider replacing a current plant with one that will do equally well in its spot but also serve wildlife.

There are several resources available on line to help you choose insect friendly plants that can also look good in your garden. One source, that actually lists plants in order of number of caterpillar species supported, is <https://www.nwf.org/NativePlantFinder>. Oak trees top the list, with over 500 species of caterpillars eating them. Put in your zip code, and the site will give you suggestions for plants that will do well in our area. Another good resource is Pollinator Partnership (www.pollinator.org) which has guides for our region along with other valuable information.

In the words of Doug Tallamy in his recent book Bringing Nature Home, "Gardening in the traditional sense is optional, earth stewardship is not." Let's all go a bit native!