## A Plant's Leaves Matter

The leaves of your landscape matter. Native trees, shrubs, perennials and grasses provide leaves that share a long history with local butterflies and moths. Yes, moths too. Moths are vital daytime and nighttime pollinators as well as food sources. When choosing plants, bearing this relationship between in mind will benefit local wildlife, and it will enhance window watching for homeowners.

Luckily, native plant availability is increasing and consumers can opt for plants suitable to their locality. If you are considering a forsythia hedge, reconsider. This Asian shrub is widely distributed and its leaves do not host American moths and butterflies (lepidoptera). Rather than forsythia, spring for native spicebush. Spicebush will create spring yellow flowers that people enjoy, and its leaves host at least 10 species of lepidoptera such as the spicebush swallowtail and the eastern tiger swallowtail. Migratory neotropical birds like the Connecticut warbler and scarlet tanager will feed their hatchlings the nutritious caterpillars that they find on the leaves in the spring. Later that year, the near-threatened wood thrush feast on the attractive red berries in the fall before migrating to their wintering grounds in Central America.

During the summer along city streets and suburbs, Norway maple can be mistaken for sugar or red maple. Birds and mammals will eat the seeds of Norway maples. However, it has only one species in the USA that it hosts. Unfortunately, it is an invasive species. According to New York Invasive Species (NYIS.info), "Asian long-horned beetles prefer such hardwood trees such as: red maple, sugar maple, boxelder, Norway maple…" Unlike the Norway maple, the iconic leaves of The Northeast's sugar maple support's over 225 species of native lepidoptera such as rosy maple moths and mourning cloak butterflies. Red maple (also used for maple sugaring) supports 280 lepidoptera species.

Consider replacing yellow iris (sales now banned in CT) with blue flag iris. Though yellow iris supports 10 species of lepidoptera in its native range, it supports zero species in the USA. The leaves of blue flag iris feed 13 species of lepidoptera larvae in the USA. These larvae then return as adult moths and butterflies, along with bees, beetles, ants and hummingbirds, to pollinate the plant.

Ground cover such as myrtle (vinca) create thick mats and spread vigorously in sun or shade. Currently there is zero evidence that this plant is used as a host plant in the USA. Native golden groundsel will happily spread in shaded areas while hosting 17 lepidoptera species. In sunny areas, consider planting the dreamy purple lovegrass which is host to the Zabulon skipper.

The contribution of each native host plant's leaves is not too great nor too small. Supply and demand is balanced in the economy of nature. For instance, the leaves of the mighty white oak host an impressive 534 lepidoptera in spring and early summer, when birds need food for their nestlings. And the sun-loving summer perennial, wild bergamot, hosts 3 species of lepidoptera later in the season.

Other notable larval host plants and their species count include but are not limited to: wild black cherry 450; white pine 232; American holly 453; highbush blueberry 223; flowering raspberry 150; New England aster 112; spotted Joe Pye weed 40; Pennsylvania sedge 36; tussock sedge 4; panic grass 20 and little bluestem grass 9.

Above: Spicebush butterfly caterpillar on leaves of it host plant, Northern Spicebush, *Lindera benzoin*
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