

Native Trees Feed Caterpillars that Feed Birds

If you had the good fortune of hearing Dr. Doug Tallamy speak at the 2014 Toward Harmony with Nature Conference, you probably found his presentation on “The Vital New Role of the Suburban/Urban Garden” interesting, entertaining and inspiring. He talked about how useful the plants we typically see in our landscaping and in our gardens were for our native pollinators and our birds.

If you’ve never given that much thought, consider that lepidoptera larvae (caterpillars of butterflies and moths) are a critically important component of our own food webs as well as that of the bird food webs. The adult stage of the caterpillar—the moths and butterflies—are important pollinators for our fresh vegetables, for example.

All our pollinators are under attack from all sorts of elements these days – weather, temperatures, drought, flooding, pesticides (especially neonicotinoids), agricultural practices, disease and other insects. If we are to maintain our own well-being and continue to enjoy many of the fresh fruits and vegetables, dairy, and meat and poultry products we now do, it will be important for us to improve the habitat for the pollinators so they can continue to thrive.



Double-toothed Prominent



Honey locust Moth caterpillar



Hackberry Emperor larva photo: Douglas Tallamy



Hackberry Emperor
photo: Megan McCarty



Big Poplar Sphinx

Although he addressed the need to use all native plants in our landscaping, Tallamy spoke specifically about our native woody plants. Here is a portion of the amazing list of woody plants he presented as host plants for our lepidoptera larvae ranked in terms of the number of caterpillar species (in parentheses) they support:

- Oaks, *Quercus* (557)
- Cherries, *Prunus* (456)
- Willows, *Salix* (455)
- Birches, *Betula* (411)
- Poplars, *Populus* (367)
- Crabapples, *Malus* (308)
- Maples, *Acer* (297)
- Blueberries, *Vaccinium* (294)
- Alders, *Alnus* (255)
- Hickories, *Carya* (235)
- Elms, *Ulmus* (215)
- Pines, *Pinus* (201)
- Hawthorns, *Crataegus* (168)
- Berries, *Rubus* (163)
- Spruces, *Picea* (150)
- Ashes, *Fraxinus* (149)
- Basswood, *Tilia* (149)
- Pears, *Pyrus* (138)
- Roses, *Rosa* (135)
- Filberts, *Corylus* (131)
- Walnuts, *Juglans* (129)
- Chestnuts, *Castanea* (127)
- Beeches, *Fagus* (127)
- Serviceberry, *Amelanchier* (124)
- Larches, *Larix* (121)
- Dogwoods, *Cornus* (118)
- Firs, *Abies* (117)
- Bayberries, *Myrica* (108)
- Viburnums, *Viburnum* (104)
- Currants, *Ribes* (99)
- Hophornbeam, *Ostrya* (94)
- Hemlocks, *Tsuga* (92)
- Spireas, *Spiraea* (89)
- Grapes, *Vitis* (79)
- Hornbeams, *Carpinus* (68)
- Mountainashes, *Sorbus* (68)
- Sweetfern, *Comptonia* (64)
- Witchhazels, *Hamamelis* (63)
- Sumacs, *Rhus* (58)
- Arborvitae, *Thuja* (50)
- Honey-locusts, *Gleditsia* (46)
- New Jersey, *Tea Ceanothus* (45)
- Sycamores, *Platanus* (45)
- Huckleberry, *Gaylussacia* (44)
- Hackberry, *Celtis* (43)
- Junipers, *Juniperus* (42)
- Elders, *Sambucus* (42)
- Ninebark, *Physocarpus* (41)

As you’re preparing to replace the ash trees which are falling victim to the emerald ash borer or just adding trees to your landscape, please keep in mind the trees and shrubs that provide the most benefit for our pollinators and for our own well-being.

To assure yourself success, be sure to choose plants that are suitable for your soil, the amount of light in the area, and the moisture content of the earth.

