

## DO YOUR PLANTS HAVE A PURPOSE?

When adding trees, shrubs or perennials to our yards, most of us make plant choices based on what is available at the local nursery, that lovely specimen we saw in another yard or a perennial a neighbor has to share. Our goal is to make our yards lovely and they are! But, in addition to being beautiful, plants have a purpose in nature and they should have a purpose in our landscapes as well. Here's why...

We have drastically changed our landscapes. A significant problem in urban and suburban areas is the predominance of non-native plants - those plants that did not exist here before the Europeans arrived. Most large trees in our neighborhood are native species, but most smaller trees, shrubs, perennials and annuals are non-native. We have removed native plants that feed and shelter small critters and have replaced them with non-natives they cannot use. These plants do look pretty, but they do not fulfill the purpose of supporting the ecosystem. And since so much of our land is now developed, our parks and forests are not enough - our yards have become important habitat.

A good example is a little butterfly, the Baltimore checkerspot (*Euphydryas phaeton*), which has been in rapid decline since the early 1990's throughout the Mid-Atlantic. The primary reason for decline is habitat loss, specifically loss of the primary host plant for the butterfly's larvae, white turtlehead (*Chelone glabra*). Many insects lay their eggs on the specific plants that their larvae will use for food. These insect-plant relationships have developed over many thousands of years and insects are typically dependent on just a few (or only one) plant species for survival. So, when the white turtlehead disappears, so does the Baltimore checkerspot. Some of our other activities contribute to the decline as well. For instance, the checkerspot caterpillars hibernate in rolled leaves on the ground and are disposed with our leaf litter!



There are now hundreds, perhaps thousands, of stories like the one above and these insect declines have much more impact than just losing a pretty butterfly. Consider this example: Many of those beautiful song birds that come to your feeder are in decline as well; this is directly related to native plants. Adult birds spend the day finding food their nestlings. (You may see them at your feeder, but they are there to feed themselves.) The parents must find caterpillars to feed their rapidly growing young and since we have removed the food source for many caterpillars, they are fewer in number, harder to find and the job of feeding baby birds is a much more difficult task. Declining bird populations are related to our plant choices.

We have an opportunity, perhaps an obligation, to reverse this trend of using non-native plants. By using native species in our gardens we can have beauty AND plants with a purpose. And the more yards that have native plants, the better. Just one more example will explain why: According to the Baltimore Checkerspot Restoration Project of Maryland, "for long-term survival, the Baltimore checkerspot requires a patchwork of suitable sites, each located no farther than a quarter-mile from the next." We can only hope that native plants go viral!

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Note that turtlehead plants prefer moist conditions, but can do well in a garden with good, loamy soil. It's not a plant for dry spots.

For native plant information visit <http://www.nativeplantcenter.net/>

Butterfly photo - Flickr Commons, by [AcrylicArtist](#)

White turtlehead photo - Bugwood.org, by James Henderson