

*Flowers,
Butterflies
and More*

By Al Cornell
Nature Photos by Jean Reece





If you are familiar with County Highway I north of Rockbridge, you've probably seen the eagle's nest in the pine at the road edge. I followed the REC lines another mile up County I and turned into a driveway that took me part way up a hill to John and Jean Reece's place. Except for the niche around the house and an area near the creek, their 21 acres are wooded.

I intended to talk to Jean about flowers and butterflies, but we started with turkey hunting and went on to many other outdoor activities. She got her turkey with a crossbow this spring. Jean and John thoroughly enjoy their nook in the hill country. Jean says, "I'm outdoors most of the time and there's dirt under my fingernails." That's a perfect start for growing flowers and attracting butterflies.

Jean worked in a greenhouse in Oregon, Wisconsin, for 13 years and learned what species and varieties of plants she wanted to have growing in her yard. We walked around the yard and she named off dozens of species of flowers and their specific varieties that were growing in her flowerbeds. Since my trip there was near the end of the frost season, there were many potted flowers that could still be moved to shelter on cold nights.

In the house are several pieces of her artwork featuring wildlife and other aspects of the outdoors. Jean began



Jean Reese's yard is a haven for wildlife.

showing me pictures of caterpillars, butterflies, moths, flowers, turkeys, and other things she's found on their property. John brought up the computer and located files of her digital photos.

I recognized having been to that location before the Reeces purchased it 11 years ago. In that time they've had a major impact on the area surrounding the house.

Jean began to explain the relationship of butterflies to high nectar-producing flowers. She said, "Monarch caterpillars like all milkweed, but they seem to prefer the leaves of the swamp milkweed. Swallowtail caterpillars like the swamp milkweed, but they also like the cup plant that grows down by the creek. Monarch caterpillars frequently form their chrysalises right on the milkweed, but swallowtails move off before forming their chrysalises.

"Caterpillars usually have a select group of host species that they can feed from. You might not think highly of the common nettle;



Clockwise, starting above: Monarch caterpillars of swamp milkweed; fritillary on purple coneflower; and monarch on liatris. Facing page: Swallowtail on cup plant.

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however, the caterpillar of the beautiful red admiral butterfly lives on those nettles. Adult butterflies feed on nectar and will feed on a greater variety of flowering plants. Those plants include liatris, milkweed species, phlox, coneflower species, penstemon, salvia, monarda species including bee balm and bergamot, cup plant, sunflowers, asters, and zinnia. Butterflies like tubular flowers that they extend their proboscis into.

“They also utilize an easy-to-construct source of water and minerals. Just fill a flat dish with sand and keep it really wet all season. Another easy source for water and minerals is watermelon rinds and over-ripe fruit put out in a dish.”

Since Jean had a keen interest in caterpillars, I asked her the tough question: “How can all of that caterpillar goo change into the amazing structure of butterfly wings in just a few days in the chrysalis?” She responded, “Ask God!” She proceeded to say that He has endowed us with the capacity to learn that caterpillars shed their skins four times before spinning cocoons and metamorphosing into butterflies.

She also mentioned that very few monarchs have been showing up in the past few years. Monarchs exhibit the world’s most fascinating insect migration as it requires more than one generation of these butterflies to complete the circuit from wintering grounds in Mexico and California, throughout the contiguous United States and southern Canada, and back to the wintering grounds. It really is “in their DNA.”



.Pipevine swallowtail, red admiral and mourning cloak on watermelon.

The Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation estimates that the monarch population has declined by 80 percent in the past 21 years. Several factors are involved in the decline. Modern efficient agricultural techniques have resulted in the reduction of milkweed. USDA Natural Resource Conservation Services offers an incentive program to establish habitat for pollinators.

Other problems loom in regard to wintering habitat destruction and the impact of climate change. Because of the monarch problem, butterfly gardening should begin with planting milkweed species that include common and swamp milkweed. Late-blooming flowers, including asters, are important sources of nectar at the approach of the monarchs’ autumn migration. Since butterflies are susceptible to most chemical pesticides, Jean said that if a pesticide must be used, an organic pesticide that is less harmful to butterflies is a better choice. A butterfly garden should include a variety of flowers that bloom from spring into autumn.

In addition to being of value to pollinating insects, flower gardening can provide a great deal of satisfaction and a sense of purpose to the gardener. Jean personifies that characteristic of being fulfilled by her attachment to the soil and through influencing the ecological miracle of plant and animal life that can abound on her piece of turf. ■

Fritillary and swallowtail sipping nectar.





The Joys of Walking

One of my first memories is of loading my teddy bear in my little red wagon and following the wagon tracks made by the team and wagon when Pa traveled to the far corner of the farm, where he and a hired man were digging potatoes. No doubt I wanted to help Pa haul the potatoes back to the farmstead with my wagon, and of course I needed my Ted along for company. The potato patch was a half mile from our farmhouse, but what did I know about distance? I was only three years old.

When I was growing up, if we wanted to go someplace within a mile or two, we walked. We walked not for exercise but with a purpose and a destination in mind: to visit a sick neighbor, to see how the crops were growing, to consider whether the cow pasture was still big enough for our small herd of dairy cows, to confirm that a recent storm had toppled a tree across a wire fence. We walked a lot.

During the warm seasons, Pa and I walked nearly every Sunday afternoon. Our 160-acre farm was laid out in a square, a half mile on each side, so when we walked the entire perimeter of the farm, as we sometimes did, we covered two miles. But we didn't keep track. There were no pedometers, and we made no attempts to record—or even talk about—how far we had walked. Instead we'd report to Ma what we had seen or heard: a fox den in a fencerow, a bluebird nest in a hollow fence post, a call of a bobwhite quail in the distance.

Eventually my twin brothers were old enough to join Pa and me, and we ranged farther on our Sunday walks. In those days there were few NO TRESPASSING signs, and we often wandered far from the home farm, checking on the neighbors' crops or simply exploring something that Pa had decided would be interesting to see. We saw, we listened, we tasted, we smelled, and we touched things. Pa didn't just show us something; he insisted that we get acquainted with it, which meant using more than our eyes.

By the time I was five or six years old, I often wandered off alone to the far corners of our farm during my free time. I was privileged to have parents who supported my wanderings, and I was blessed to have a father who loved nature deeply. Of course, he never talked about it that way. It was his actions that gave him away. To this day, walking and listening and watching remain among the fun things that I do. ■

(Excerpted from Whispers and Shadows: A Naturalist's Memoir. Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2015.)

Go to www.jerryapps.com for more about Jerry's writing and TV work.



Energy Efficiency Tip of the Month



Periodically inspect your dryer vent to ensure it is not blocked. This will save energy and may prevent a fire. Manufacturers recommend using rigid venting material – not plastic vents that may collapse and cause blockages.

Source: energy.gov



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