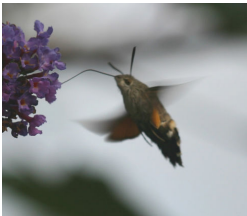


Nectar Plants for Moths

How to support these marvels of the night ...

These days, *butterflies* are getting a high profile in gardening circles. Butterflies are beautiful, and it's easy for gardeners to plant flowers which will attract them. Yet butterflies are just one family in the Insect Order known as Lepidoptera. The remaining 96% of Lepidoptera are *moths*. There are at least 2,500 species of moths in Britain, some with extraordinarily beautiful wing patterns, but because most of them fly at night, they are not as well-known as their butterfly cousins.



There are two common day-flying moths which many gardeners will see in a warm summer visiting bushes such as Buddleja and certain Hebes. These are the *Silver Y*, so-called because it has a small silver shape on each wing reminiscent of the letter y, and the *Hummingbird Hawkmoth*, which hovers in front of flowers as it sucks out nectar through its long thin tongue. Both of these moths migrate to Britain in large numbers from Southern Europe in warm summers.

Green food for moth larvae

The 2,500 or so moths in Britain have very specific caterpillar food plants. Some of them can only use a single species of wild plant. This is a good reason to grow a range of native plant species in your garden, especially common hedgerow shrubs such as Hawthorn (which can be coppiced if they get too big). See booklist below for details of books listing larval food plants.

Nectar for adult moths

Adult moths, like butterflies, feed on nectar which they drink through their long tongues. There are a number of British and Irish wild flowers (e.g. several *Silenes*) which are moth-pollinated. This means that the flowers have evolved specifically to provide nectar for moths, and in return the moths cross-pollinate the flowers.

I used to assume that the typical 'moth flowers' that I list below were the main source of nectar for moths. However my observations at dusk in the warm summer of 2006 have shown that *moths visit many other flowers apart from the classic 'moth flowers'*. In fact numerous sorts of wild flowers and insect-friendly garden flowers receive visits from moths seeking nectar. Go round your garden on a warm summer evening at nightfall, and see the moths at work. It's an education. Perhaps the 'moth flowers' are simply those that evolved to be particularly attractive to moths as a reproductive strategy. It is certainly worth planting them, but don't assume that these are the only flowers that moths will make use of in your garden.

Most 'moth flowers' are white or pale coloured, so that moths can see them at dusk. They are usually scented, and often the scent becomes stronger in the evening. And the flowers often have long tubes, to accommodate the moths' long tongues and exclude other insects. If you plant these flowers you will certainly help to feed adult moths in your garden.

Some classic 'moth flowers':

- **Wild Honeysuckle** (*Lonicera periclymenum*). We grow the cultivar 'Graham Thomas', which GST originally found wild in a hedge in Warwickshire and introduced to the nursery trade. It has a long flowering season, a strong night scent and is pale cream in colour – a classic moth plant, although the long flower tube means that only larger moths with long tongues can use it. We find this cultivar much more resistant to diseases than the other cultivars of *L. periclymenum*. All honeysuckles do best with their roots in a damp shady site and their head in the sun.
- **Campions**. To grow the following you may have to start with seed from one of the suppliers of wild flower seed. All are very easy to grow in a well-drained soil in a sunny position:
 - Night- flowering catchfly (*Silene noctiflora*). An annual with pale pink flowers;
 - Nottingham catchfly (*Silene nutans*), a perennial with white flowers;
 - Bladder Campion (*Silene vulgaris*). A perennial with white flowers with inflated calyces; looks good in herbaceous borders or wild flower meadows.
 - The trailing Sea Campion (*Silene maritima*) is similar, and is sometimes sold as a rock plant (but do not plant the double-flowered kind);
 - White Campion (*Silene latifolia*, also called *Silene alba*) – this is attractive to bees as well as moths.
- **Pinks** (*Dianthus* species). The kinds to grow are the single-flowered rockery pinks, forms or hybrids of *D. plumarius* and *D. caesius* close to the ancestral wild species. These like sunny well-drained positions. The tall *D. carthusianorum* will grow in gravel or in short grass. *D. superbus* likes a damper soil and will grow in partial shade. All of these can easily be grown from seed. The highly hybridised and double- flowered sorts sold in garden centres are no good.
- **Sweet Williams** (*D. barbatus*). The single- flowered, old-fashioned kinds will provide nectar for butterflies and some moth species. These biennials are very easily grown from seed, which should be sown in June.
- **Soapwort** (*Saponaria officinalis*). The sort for moths is the single-flowered type with pale pink flowers. (Note that the ones commonly grown are double or semi-double flowered, you will need to grow the single- flowered one from seed or get it from a herb or wild flower nursery). This plant is invasive in rich soil, and is better planted in poor stony soil or rubble in a sunny position.
- **Evening Primroses** (*Oenothera biennis*, *O. glazoviana*, *O. stricta*). No relation to the real primroses, these tall biennial plants were introduced from North America almost 500 years ago and soon became naturalised throughout Europe, where they have evolved into several new species. Some strains are quite coarse and weedy – try to get seeds or young plants of a more attractive larger-flowered strain from a friend's or neighbour's garden. *O. glazoviana* is one of the best. By afternoon they look a mess, but in late evening pristine pale yellow flowers appear that attract moths like a magnet. In recent years a host of smaller *Oenothera* species and cultivars have been introduced; it is not clear that they are all moth plants so it may be a case of trial and error. *O. odorata* is one of these which I am told is popular with moths.
- **Red Valerian** (*Centranthus ruber*) A well-known cottage-garden plant which loves to grow on dry stone walls or in gravel; with white or pink flowers. the Hummingbird Hawkmoth (illustrated above) is especially fond of it.
- **Flowering Tobacco** (*Nicotiana affinis*). This is a white-flowered annual or biennial, evening scented, and easily grown from seed. Young plants are sometimes sold in markets and garden centres. If possible go for the true *N. affinis* rather than the coloured F1 hybrids, which seem to have lost most of their scent and may be lacking nectar. The fashionable *N.*

sylvestris, which has very long drooping tubular flowers, is obviously moth-pollinated in its native homeland of Central America, but there are no British moths (or other insects) with tongues long enough to reach its nectar, so I can't recommend it.

- **Hemp Agrimony** (*Eupatorium cannabinum*). This tall herbaceous wild flower needs a permanently damp soil and forms imposing clumps. Not only is it an excellent butterfly plant, but in my garden clouds of moths can be seen nectaring from it at dusk, attracting bats overhead. This common wildflower is a marvellous addition to urban and suburban gardens to help increase biodiversity. It is essential to get the unadulterated wild form. The garden form with 'double' flowers produces no nectar and is useless for insects. This plant needs plenty of room, and you may have to give it water in dry weather if the soil dries out.

The following butterfly and/or bee flowers may well also attract moths to your garden, and this list is by no means complete; there are many more:

Common Valerian and **Marsh Valerian** (*Valeriana officinalis* and *V. dioeca*), **Verbena** (*Verbena bonariensis*), **Wild Marjoram** (*Origanum vulgare*), **Wild Privet** (*Ligustrum vulgare*), **Buddleja**, **Hebe**, especially the varieties 'Midsummer Beauty' and 'Great Orme', **Bell Heather** (*Erica cinerea*), **Knapweeds** (*Centaurea nigra*, *C. scabiosa* and close relatives), **Lamb's Ear** (*Stachys lanata*), and many other wildflowers.

The Best Books about Moths:

To identify moths (and other insects) in Britain and Ireland, the best introductory works are those of Michael Chinery. He has published a number of good, well-illustrated general works about insects, such as:

Garden Wildlife of Britain and Europe. Collins, 1997. ISBN 026 167408 0. Also contains a short informative chapter about wildlife gardening.

Complete British Insects. Collins, 2006. ISBN 0 00 717966 9. This excellent book contains good photographs of most of the common moths that the gardener is likely to see.

A classic introductory work, with attractive hand-painted illustrations rather than photographs is *The Oxford Book of Insects*, edited by John Burton, first published in 1968. ISBN: 0 19 910005 – 5. Out of print but available in second-hand bookshops and libraries

If you want to learn more about the world of moths, the essential book to read is *Enjoying Moths* by Roy Leverton, published by T and AD Poyser, 2001. ISBN 0 85661 124 7. By no means a dry tome, this is a book by a life-long enthusiast that is totally readable.

The definitive identification guide is *Field Guide to the Moths of Great Britain and Ireland*, by Paul Waring and Martin Townsend, illustrated by Richard Lewington. British Wildlife Publishing, 2003. ISBN 0 9531 39999 1 3. Comprehensive, and Richard Lewington's illustrations are unequalled.

To find out about larval food plants, read *Foodplant List for the Caterpillars of Britain's Butterflies and Larger Moths*, by Tim Crafer, Atropos Publishing, 2005. ISBN 09551086 08 (available from www.atropos.info). It is actually intended as an identification aid to caterpillars, so it is organised according to the plant species and the caterpillars that are known to feed on them.

More Moth Goings-on

The main **moth conservation organisation** is called Butterfly Conservation. A dynamic organisation that is working hard on behalf of all Lepidoptera. See their website at: www.butterfly-conservation.org

An **on-line identification guide** to the moths of Britain and Ireland, with over a thousand pictures is UK Moths: www.ukmoths.org.uk

National Moth Night is every September. See: www.nationalmothnight.info for information about how you can take part.

© **Marc Carlton 2010.**

You are welcome to print this text for personal use or to use for educational purposes

Email: fwg@phonecoop.coop. Website: www.foxleas.com