

Flowers 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. Moths are very important in the wider environment as food for bats.



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

Some of the 2,500 or so moths in Britain have specific caterpillar food plants. Some of them can only use a single species of wild plant, although others will eat a wider range. This is a good reason to grow a range of European native plant species in your garden, especially common hedgerow shrubs such as Hawthorn (which can be coppiced if they get too big). See the book list 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 generally regarded as being moth-pollinated. This means that the flowers have evolved specifically to provide nectar for moths, and in return the moths cross-pollinate the flowers.

We can't assume that the typical 'moth flowers' that I list below are the main source of nectar for moths. It can't be the case because there are so many species of moths in the UK and Ireland and the specialist 'moth flowers' do not grow everywhere. My observations at dusk in a warm summer showed 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 look for moths at work.

Perhaps the specialist 'moth flowers' are simply some 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*). This has 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. The cultivar 'Graham Thomas', is 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, but can be invasive.
 - 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 or gravel 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.
- **Red Valerian** (*Centranthus ruber*) A well-known cottage-garden plant which loves to grow on dry stone walls or in gravel; it seeds itself and can be invasive. Has white or pink flowers. the Hummingbird Hawkmoth (illustrated above) is especially fond of it.
- **Hemp Agrimony** (*Eupatorium cannabinum*). This tall herbaceous wild flower needs a permanently damp soil and forms imposing clumps. It is a useful 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.
- **Clematis heracleifolia** This is an upright herbaceous perennial from the far east, with small tubular pale blue flowers that are scented and look like hyacinth flowers. This and its hybrid the vigorous climber *Clematis x jouiniana* 'Praecox' will both attract moths on a warm summer evening.
- **Hebe 'Great Orme'** This is a medium sized evergreen shrub with spikes of pale pink flowers in July and August. There are many Hebes, of varying attractiveness to insects, but this never fails to attract a wide range of insects, including moths after dark.
- **Flowering Tobacco** (*Nicotiana glauca*) is a moth plant in its South American homeland, but it has a long flower tube and there is no moth resident in Britain that can access its nectar. However it will attract the very large Convolvulus Hawk Moth, which comes here as a summer migrant from southern Europe but does not breed here. So if you grow *N. glauca* you might be lucky enough to see a Convolvulus Hawk Moth.

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**, **Bell Heather** (*Erica cinerea*), **Knapweeds** (*Centaurea nigra*, *C. scabiosa* and close relatives), and many other wildflowers.

I'm very keen to receive feedback about plants for moths, especially any details of other flowers that consistently attract moths.

Moth Websites:

UK Moths – especially for moth ID

Atropos - a UK journal and website for butterfly, moth and dragonfly enthusiasts

National Moth Night

Moths Count – about recording moths

Some 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 book contains good photographs of most of the common moths that the gardener is likely to see.

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.

A 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 <http://www.atroposbooks.co.uk/>). 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.

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