

WEEDING WEEDS

by Jill Reid, Oudtshoorn



Common Dotted Border on *Moquinella rubra* (vuurhoutjies).

What an absurd occupation! However, with the growing popularity of gardening for butterflies, the 'weed' has come into its own. For instance, the common and invasive *Lepidium capense*, bird-seed grass, now proudly flourishes, its delicate arms bedecked with pearlescent seeds, for it has been identified as having a very special presence. With wild mustard *Sisymbrium capense*, it is the larval host plant of the dainty Common Meadow White butterfly *Pontia helice*. Most of the plants that female butterflies lay their eggs on are 'roadside weeds', wild grasses or indigenous trees and shrubs, and they are now preserved, and even specially planted, to attract butterflies. The concept is simple, gardening-friendly, easy to implement and extremely rewarding. Even the spadework is pleasant!

Preparation involves mere observation as a first step. Intrepid growers of these delightful insects must first watch their patch carefully to see which butterflies naturally occur in their area. Female butterflies particularly should be identified.

This is not at all difficult and the novice can quickly turn expert by applying the following generalities. Females seldom display the rapid zigzag flight pattern of males on the lookout for mates. Their behaviour is generally more languid and, apart from alighting on flowers to feed, they appear to take special interest in particular plants. They will hover in the same area and re-visit a plant, touching the leaves and smelling its suitability with their feet or probosces. Female butterflies are generally smaller than males. Often, females have a different colour pattern to their male counterparts. There are many butterfly identification books* for easy reference.

Once you have tagged at least one butterfly and noted the plants that it regularly attends, you can start looking for its eggs, larvae or pupae. The eggs will be found singly, or in batches, under the leaf, but sometimes along the stem or in the florets of the plant. If you have not found the eggs, the much-chewed leaves and presence of droppings (or frass) signify young butterflies in their larval (caterpillar) stage. One thing leads to another – if a certain species of butterfly is laying on a specific plant, you can be certain of what both butterfly and plant are. For example, the African Monarch butterfly, *Danaus chrysippus* lays her eggs on members of the family Asclepidaceae. Her look-alike and mimic, the Mocker Swallowtail, only uses plants belonging to the Rutaceae family (that includes citrus trees).

You could take the dog by the tail and start by identifying the indigenous plants in your area. Reference books list common larval host plants and their attendant butterflies, so if you have the plants growing in the garden, female butterflies will invariably find them, followed of course, by the males. Too time consuming for you? The butterfly gardener can simply buy the seeds of plants and select a sunny, windless spot, cast abroad, water and watch for the results.

While this all sounds frivolous and pleasurable, there is a serious conservation thrust behind the movement of Gardening for Butterflies in South Africa. ICUN statistics report that many butterflies, hitherto common and mobile, are under threat or even extinct. Apparently 98% of butterfly eggs in the wild do not survive to maturity. The most common threat is

habitat destruction, since butterflies seem to favour a specific area or even a specific plant, and if this is removed, may die without mating or laying. Pesticides too play a destructive role and wanton spraying not only kills the creatures themselves, but many other insects that are part of a healthy, balanced ecosystem. Their natural predators like chameleons, lizards, spiders, birds, mantids, wasps and ladybirds take their toll, and many a gardener squashes caterpillars. The movement thus strives to:

- Educate and encourage gardeners in South Africa to preserve butterfly larval host plants and therefore butterflies.
- Create suburban butterfly corridors through which butterflies can move, feed and procreate
- Ensure a healthy ecosystem in which these creatures play a vital part. ♡



Garden Acraea on host plant *Kiggelaria africana* (wild peach).

*To this end, I have written a book called *Butterfly gardening in South Africa* published by Briza, which gives the gardener the nuts and bolts of the concept, and illustrates common butterflies and their larval host plants. Signed copies of the book are available from Jill Reid, PO Box 1316, Oudtshoorn, 6620, tel (023) 541 1095. Another good identification guide is *Butterflies of South Africa: A field guide* by Mark Williams, Southern Books. See special offer on page 194 for Jill's new butterfly cards.

