

## Butterflies on the Brink

Written by Janet Goodman, BT Contributor  
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### Pollinator “pets” can make a comeback in Miami-Dade



Is it a stretch to call insect pollinators pets? Many Florida municipalities argued as much before 2012, when the state signed into law the Beekeepers Protection Act. That law supersedes county and municipal regulations, and allows residents to maintain bee hives on non-agricultural properties. Local governments had previously argued that 40,000 bees in a hive were 40,000 pets, exceeding residential pet limit codes.

Butterflies are also essential pollinators that help gardens grow. I recently encouraged their presence in my backyard by planting native host plants, on which certain species will lay eggs that develop into caterpillars. These “cats” feed on host plant leaves and eventually form chrysalises from which butterflies emerge.

While there are no pet-limit codes concerning butterflies on residential properties, these insects can bring as much joy as more traditional furry, feathered, or scaly companions.

The goal of local non-profit Bound by Beauty ([boundbybeauty.org](http://boundbybeauty.org)) is to change how people interact with nature through education about butterflies. Miami Shores resident Mary Benton is one of the founders, and she and her organization have been involved in the planning and planting of dozens of residential butterfly gardens. Volunteers created butterfly-friendly environments at several schools and a native pine rockland garden at Miami Shores Community Church.

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At Plaza 98, the pop-up public space on NE 98th Street just off NE 2nd Avenue in the Shores, BBB planted a variety of nectar and host plants. Benton tells the *BT*: “Within a couple of days, monarchs had already laid eggs on the milkweed, and atalas on the coontie.” Some of the plaza plants didn’t survive the spring drought, but the coontie -- host plant for the atalas -- is currently covered in caterpillars.

Calusa, Tequesta, and Seminole Indians made a bread from the roots of the coontie. By the 1930s, coontie numbers were decimated by local mills that overharvested the plant for starch products, and atala butterflies were considered extinct. But in 1979, one small colony was discovered on Key Biscayne.

Urban replanting of coontie, as well as atala caterpillar relocation throughout Miami-Dade, has encouraged atala numbers to grow and spread. Today the blue, black, and orange butterfly is back from the brink.

In December 2017, Bound by Beauty began a Foster Garden program. “We rescued 861 atala caterpillars and found foster gardens for 1145,” says Benton. “Our most recent foster garden is Vizcaya, which warmly welcomed 100 caterpillars rescued from a garden in Miami Shores.”

With coontie ready in my garden, Benton gave me nine reddish-brown, yellow-spotted atala cats to foster. I watched them form pupae and witnessed the miracle of an emerging butterfly. So far, three atalas call my garden home and have laid clutches totaling 15 eggs on fresh green coontie fronds.

Other South Florida butterflies are in trouble, too. Benton notes that the loss of native habitat has endangered the Schaus swallowtail, the Miami blue, Bartram’s scrub-hairstreak, and Florida leafwing butterflies. She encourages people to plant pineland croton, which is the host plant for Bartrams and leafwings, “in hopes we can bring them back, as has been done with the atala.” Pesticides, droughts, and storms also affect their numbers.

“Giant swallowtails almost disappeared in Florida as a result of the citrus canker eradication effort, which nearly wiped out their host plants,” says Benton. “Zebra butterflies are starting to

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rebound after Hurricane Irma last fall.” Many of her own host plants are kept in pots, and she was able to rescue some caterpillars by bringing them indoors during the storm.

Walking through Benton’s garden is a dreamlike experience. A flurry of color surrounds you as you marvel at her resident monarchs, zebras, and atalas, as well as a number of other species, like Gulf fritillaries, Julias, and giant swallowtails. According to Benton, “I have seen 22 different species of butterflies in my garden.”

Benton would like to see the county stop spraying for mosquitoes, as it kills beneficial insects like pollinators and reduces insect food for birds. “I’d also like to see more urban gardeners creating wildlife sanctuaries and healthy green corridors between gardens that are chemical-free, Benton continues. “The average person can avoid purchasing nectar and host plants that have been treated with neonicotinoids, a systemic pesticide that kills any creature that feasts on the plant. They can replace thirsty sod with drought-tolerant natives that attract pollinators. Even condo dwellers can work together to create pollinator habitats in their common areas.”

Many weeds, such as Spanish needle, can be left in gardens, as they provide nectar for zebras and Gulf fritillaries.

Benton quotes the North American Butterfly Association: “If we can save the butterflies, we might be able to save ourselves.” She points out that Bound by Beauty believes everyone can make a difference by creating butterfly habitats. “Butterfly gardens are magical, healing, transformative places,” she says. “Can you imagine if Miami Shores became known as the Butterfly Village?”

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