

Flora & Fauna Connections

by Cori Westcott and Susan Pang

We all know of the Monarch butterfly's connection with the Milkweeds. This same connection applies to most Missouri or Ozark species of butterflies and moths. They are specialist insects. Beautiful and showy creatures often begin their lives on humble, weedy flora. So don't assume that everything in the garden needs to be glorious and showy. For the benefit of our insects, we must mix in some native "weeds." Many of us have learned to incorporate milkweeds in our garden space.

This video shows a pair of Red Admirals nectaring on a *Buttonbush (Cephalanthus occidentalis)* flower. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RLUUCAQSTZI> They bloom in late June and early July. These Red Admiral butterflies would not exist if it were not for their host plants, the nettles. The female Red Admiral will only lay her eggs upon the leaf of a nettle plant. *Stinging Nettle (Urtica dioica)*, *Wood Nettle (Laportea canadensis)*, *False Nettle (Boehmeria cylindrica)* and *Clearweed (Pilea pumila)* all belong to the Nettle (*Urticaceae*) family of plants.

Nettles are often found in moist woodlands and to a lesser extent, meadows. Some nettles spread by rhizomes and can easily cover large spaces. Castlewood State Park has a trail named Stinging Nettle Trail that travels along a woodland floor blanketed in nettles. For this reason, most nettles are not cultivated in a city garden. An exception to this could be the *Clearweed (Pilea pumila)*. The *Clearweed* grows in moist shade. For more information see http://www.wildflower.org/plants/result.php?id_plant=PIPU2. If you have a boggy area where water accumulates, you might want to consider this plant for the benefit of the Red Admiral and to attract them to your yard. Clearweed is a good ground cover especially if you have a larger area where it is best suited.

When we view plants for what they do for Missouri's fauna, it's interesting how the Milkweed doesn't look so bad anymore! This same principle can be applied to most plants that are native - the beautiful and the plain Janes. Consider planting the showy *Buttonbush (Cephalanthus occidentalis)* and giving it center stage in your garden for the benefit of pollinators of all kinds!