

## The Things I Raised Last Summer



This title sounds a bit like a tune about garden crops. However, it relates to the insects I raised throughout the year. Moth larvae actually. Really BIG moth larvae. Caterpillars of moths known as “giant silk moths”.

I started the rearing year off last October raising some Atlas Moth larvae. Atlas moths are indigenous to the tropics and emerge throughout the year. A friend of mine sent me a surprise package of eggs of this huge moth (it has a wing span of 10-12 inches), because he could not feed the caterpillars over the winter. I discovered that the little worms would feed on our native Salal, which is evergreen. So, I hand reared them indoors for several months through the winter. They grew into caterpillars the size of a thick hotdog, being blue-green in color and with long white fleshy tubercles on their bodies. Quite handsome. They spun their cocoons and emerged a few months later as the biggest moths I have ever seen!

During the summer, I usually have 5 or 6 different species of caterpillars feeding in special sleeves that you can slip over the food plant and tie so that the larvae cannot escape, nor can the predators get at them.

Probably the most unusual larvae I reared were the so called “Hickory Horned Devils”. These large (6 inch) worms have 8 formidable looking spines on the front end of the body that stick up about 3/4 of an inch. The spines are harmless, but the appearance of the large body and horns at first sight is enough to unsettle a person. These larvae, when mature, burrow into the ground to pupate. So, when they were ready, I provided each one with a 4” X 4” planting pot filled with potting soil. It sort of felt like “planting” the caterpillars. They readily dug down into the soil and turned into pupae. A couple of pictures of the larva and adult are on the bulletin board of the “Insect Corner” in the Master Gardener room at the Extension Office. These are truly good looking insects at both stages of their lives.

Of course, rearing insects from outside our region puts a certain obligation on the “Butterfly Farmer”. One must never release non-native species into the wild. Most would not survive to the next generation, but you never know. On the east coast of the U.S. some imported Giant silk moths, called Cynthia moths, were released in the 1800s. They had been imported from China in the hopes that an American silk industry might get started. That didn’t work out, so the moths were released. They never did become a problem since their main food plant is the Ailanthus tree or Chinese Tree of Heaven. They are now considered to be almost an indigenous animal on the east coast because of their success in survival.

Raising insects and/or maintaining an insect zoo can be a fascinating hobby. Perhaps you would be interested in doing that some day! Let me know!