Swallowtail butterflies are quite beautiful. You may have noticed them in your garden this summer and fall either as they flitted from plant to plant or even before that as the caterpillar they were before! You would most likely find them more interested in your herbs and citrus than any other part of your garden. Their diet mainly consists of members of the Umbelliferae family, which will include parsley, fennel, dill, carrot, and celery. Many members of the swallowtail family feed as larvae on plants of the citrus family, Rutaceae. Some of these attractive butterflies are therefore considered pests in citrus orchards.

Swallowtail butterflies are large, colorful butterflies that form the family Papilionidae. There are over 550 species, and though the majority is tropical, members of the family are found on all continents except Antarctica. The family includes the largest butterflies in the world, the birdwing butterflies of Australia.

Swallowtails differ from all other butterflies in a number of anatomical traits. Most notably, their caterpillars possess a unique defense organ behind their heads, called the osmeterium. Normally hidden, this forked structure can be everted when the caterpillar is threatened, or forced out with a gentle squeeze, and emits very strong smelly secretions containing terpenes. Normally hidden, it is an orange v-shaped structure will appear if the caterpillar feels threatened. The adults are often tailed like the forked tail of some swallows, giving the insect its name.

The stages of all the butterflies are the egg, pupa (caterpillar), chrysalis, and butterfly! The egg is dome-shaped, smooth or obscurely faceted, not as high as wide, somewhat leathery, opaque. The larva appears stout, smooth or with a series of fleshy tubercles on the dorsum: sometimes with a raised fleshy protuberance (the so-called hood or crest) on the fourth segment, which is also generally thickened above. The pupa is variable in form but superiorly most often curved backwards and attached by the tail, normally in a perpendicular position, and further secured by a silken girth round the middle. The various butterflies’ wings are extraordinarily variable in shape. The hind wing very frequently with a tail, which may be slender, or broad and spatulate, but is always an extension of the termen at vein 4. Swallowtail butterflies, being large, colorful, and attractive, have often been the target of butterfly collectors in earlier times. The largest of these, the Birdwing butterflies are particularly sought after and are cultured in butterfly farms for the purpose of collectors.

The Oregon Swallowtail is the state insect of Oregon. The Eastern Tiger Swallowtail is the state insect of Virginia and the state butterfly of Georgia, Delaware, and South Carolina. The Black Swallowtail is the state butterfly of Oklahoma.

Many religions believe butterflies send messages and travel between souls and the living world (Earth); the same butterflies can and do also guide souls during soul burials. Seeing a butterfly shortly after the death of a loved one means the soul is sending a message to you. Butterflies have been depicted in both music and art for centuries. People do not seem to get tired of the beautiful images they evoke, so watch your garden for them and plan to plant both the nectar and food plants to attract them.

Have any questions about gardening in Central Texas? Contact ask.bcmga@gmail.com