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Dutchman's Pipevine Draws Butterflies and Curious Gardeners

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Hot summer days have many gardeners searching for a shady nook. Shade trees can fit the bill as can vigorous vines growing up pergolas, front porches and other structures. One vine noted for its vigorous growth and attractive, heart-shaped leaves is Dutchman's pipevine (*Aristolochia macrophylla*).

Native to North America, this deciduous woody vine typically grows 10 to 15 feet in length but under optimal conditions, it may reach 30 feet or more so a strong support system is necessary. Not only does it attract a variety of pollinating insects but it is the larval host food for the pipevine swallowtail butterfly. Dutchman's pipevines were named for the shape of their flowers, which resemble the Meerschaum pipes of European origin.

Image by the [Alabama Butterfly Atlas](#)



The flowers are very distinctive and usually a pale yellow color but heavily dappled with purple, green and brown. Often they are somewhat hidden by the heavy foliage. Plants usually bloom in June in Connecticut and their scent may not be very pleasing to humans but it does attract small flies and gnats. These creatures begin to crawl into the flower but are prevented from leaving by small hairs in the blossom's throat forcing them to continue their downward journey to the flower's sticky stigma. The pollen attached to their bodies when visiting a previous flower is deposited. Once the blossom is fertilized, the hairs relax and the insects can escape with more pollen stuck to its body and go on to pollinate other Dutchman's pipevine blooms.

As unique as the flowers and their forced pollination may be, of even greater interest to many is the plant's ability to serve as a larval host food for the lovely, and not too common, pipevine swallowtail. These gorgeous blue and black winged butterflies are dependent on pipevine species for their survival. Just as a monarch butterfly larva can only feed on milkweed (*Asclepius spp.*), pipevine swallowtail larvae can only feed on pipevine species.

In both cases, this is a survival mechanism as the host plants contain natural chemicals that are toxic to many animals but not to the caterpillars. Potential predators recognize the color patterns of the caterpillars and butterflies and generally leave them alone as the chemical protection from the caterpillar extends to the adult butterflies.



During Victorian times, Dutchman's pipevine was a very popular plant and used quite generously to climb up front porches, and over arbors and other sites in need of shade. As Dutchman's pipevines were planted in more northerly areas of the United States, pipevine swallowtails followed. Recent decades have seen a decrease in Dutchman pipevine plantings with a corresponding decline in pipevine swallowtails. The North American Butterfly Association is promoting among other venues, a 'Pipe-Dream' project and encouraging as many people as possible to plant Dutchman's pipe to boost pipevine swallowtail populations.

Image of arbor at Strawberry Banke, Portsmouth, NH by Dawn Pettinelli, UConn

Dutchman's pipevine is a member of the birthwort family, as is wild ginger (*Asarum canadense*) and the resemblance is seen in the leaves. It is not a difficult plant to grow and does well in full sun to part shade. More flowers are produced when planted on sunny sites. This plant needs moderate amounts of moisture and a well-drained soil. Expect to water regularly if planted in full sun. Fertilize once a year in the spring.

Plants may be purchased from some local nurseries or mail order sources but seeds are also available. While I have seen mixed directions on starting seeds, I would assume that since this plant is native, that a cold stratification period is needed for seeds to germinate. So either plant ripened seeds in a nursery bed for germination next year or mix the seeds with lightly moistened peat moss in a re-closable plastic bag and place it in your refrigerator's vegetable keeper for 3 months. Then plant seeds in a seedling starting mix under lights or placed on a sunny window.

Prune plants to shape and control growth. This is best done in late winter or early spring before the new leaves open. Remove dead or damaged vines and thin older stems to encourage new growth. Up to about one quarter of the plant can be removed each year to keep the plant in a designated area.

Gardeners with woodland areas who want to attract pipevine butterflies but are unable to accommodate large vines can plant the ground hugging Virginia pipevine (*A. serpentaria*). This species only grows 2 feet high and does best in semi-shade on well-drained woodsy soils with plenty of organic matter.

For questions about growing Dutchman's pipevine or on other horticultural topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.