

GUEST ESSAY

In a Brutal Summer, Miracles Still Bloom

Sept. 2, 2024

**By Margaret Renkl**

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Drought is a kind of madness. Drought combined with record heat makes you long to become subterranean, a mole digging into cool darkness. This longing feels the way desire feels when you are too young to recognize it as desire. Even safely inside a cool house, your body is telling you that something is off. What you long for cannot be had. Until you think about it for a moment, it can't even be named.

As a matter of technical fact, Davidson County, Tenn., where I live, is not in a state of drought, but the scattered showers that have blown in briefly here and there throughout the summer have not come to our yard. We got one hot rain so gentle it hardly broke the leaf canopy, and that was it for us all summer long. The forecasters at Nashville Severe Weather call these random pop-up showers “playing the wattery” — like a lottery but with water.

Day after day last week the temperature climbed — 99, 100, 101, 102 — and the air quality alerts arrived in flocks. Nashville Electric Service sent me an email: “Tips for Extreme Heat in Music City this Week.” In the photos on the pet-rescue sites that I check obsessively now, hoping to find just the right canine family member for this newly dogless house, all the dogs are panting. I feel the need to pant myself.

I hang the wet sheets on the clothesline and watch winged insects glittering down for a drink. Everyone is thirsty, but it's the insects I worry about most, the tiny ones too fragile to chance drinking from the water dishes we set out for everyone else.

Despite the heat, I take a daily census of my pollinator garden. Early September is peak insect season in Middle Tennessee, but I'm worried about my winged neighbors. Some butterflies and native bees are especially stressed by heat, and drought is hard on everybody. We can't afford to lose any of our pollinators. In just the past 40 years, we've already lost nearly half the world's insects.

Every day I am thankful to find my pollinator garden buzzing. The showiest summer perennials — beebalm and milkweed and coneflower and black-eyed Susan and Joe Pye weed and swamp rose mallow — are all bloomed out now, but the ironweed and mistflower and goldenrod and frostweed and blue lobelia and mountain mint and boneset are covered with winged and crawling things. Not all these creatures are feeding on flowers.

By the time I take my lunchtime stroll around the yard, the carpenter bees have taken over the zinnias and the black-eyed Susans. Their preferred flowers, the blooms of the passionvine, don't open till later in the afternoon. Even the zinnias whose outer petals are missing, torn away by goldfinches harvesting seeds, are still pumping out pollen. The bees aren't troubled by the missing petals.

I take immense pleasure from watching the carpenter bees work the passionflowers. Only a carpenter bee is large enough to pollinate a passionflower, and this year's extravagant bounty of passionfruit attests to the bees' work. A passionfruit isn't ripe until it falls to the ground. Ripe passionfruit feeds birds and squirrels and opossums and foxes and raccoons and me.

Passionvine is the sole host plant of the gulf fritillary butterfly, and every day now the female butterflies flit above the vines, depositing eggs on the newest growth and the freshest tendrils. Soon the caterpillars will hatch and begin their own work of clearing the vines of leaves. Just as the ripe passionfruit begins to fall, the caterpillars will be emerging from their chrysalides. Butterflies.

I have come to rely on this deeply interdependent cycle: vine, leaf, flower, bee; butterfly, caterpillar, fruit, hungry wildlife. I cling to it as tightly as any goldfinch hanging upside down from a nodding sunflower. However tragically the climate crisis has disrupted other natural patterns, this one seems as sturdy as the drought-impervious passionvine itself, its roots anchored so deep in the soil I couldn't pull them up if I tried.

Not every caterpillar survives to become a butterfly. That, too, is part of the cycle. Songbirds feed their young a diet made up overwhelmingly of caterpillars, which are soft, fat with nutrients, and no trouble to catch. If you want to feed the birds, you need to cultivate the plants that feed the caterpillars. In his 2019 book, "Nature's Best Hope: A New Approach to Conservation That Starts in Your Yard," the entomologist Douglas W. Tallamy notes that even the tiniest songbirds, like chickadees, require 6,000 to 9,000 caterpillars to raise a single brood of baby birds. In one way of looking at it, butterflies lay so many eggs because nestlings need so many caterpillars.

This is the time of year when weedy gardens like mine make their most persuasive argument for planting natives. A garden full of native wildflowers is a beacon for pollinators. The flowers attract the insects. The insects attract everybody else.

The butterflies come singly or in pairs now: monarchs, eastern tiger swallowtails, black swallowtails and pipevine swallowtails, plus a few varieties I've never seen here before. One day last week I was looking out the window when I saw a butterfly moving so fast I thought at first it was a hummingbird, though it was bigger than a hummingbird and moving quite unlike a hummingbird. I went outside to see what radiant mystery was making use of my zinnias. It turned out to be an eastern giant swallowtail, the largest butterfly in North America. A creature I've never seen before in my life, and here it was in our yard!

The next day I found two huge, fifth-instar monarch caterpillars on the swamp milkweed. I'd been looking and looking for monarch cats because the milkweed was clearly being chewed up by caterpillars, but nary a caterpillar could I find. I figured the birds and wasps were eating them before I could find them in the

amount of time I was willing to spend out in the full sun of a 100-degree day. Yet here were two who had evaded predators long enough to be hours away from pupating.

These are the miracles, once ordinary but now growing rarer, that keep me going. We are a species that ruins too much of what we touch. But we are also the flower-planting species, and we come into this world primed for wonder. One day many years ago, I walked into the garden with my baby on my hip. “Ohhhhhhhh,” he breathed. “Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.” I turned to see what was captivating him. It was a patch of flowers covered with swallowtails, gently pulsing their wings.

Margaret Renkl, a contributing Opinion writer, is the author of the books “The Comfort of Crows: A Backyard Year,” “Graceland, at Last” and “Late Migrations.”

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A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 18 of the New York edition with the headline: In a Brutal Summer, Miracles Still Bloom