

ELA PATEL'S BUTTERFLY GARDEN IS AN ECOLOGICAL MODEL FOR WINDSOR MEMBERS AND THE COMMUNITY-AT-LARGE.

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TAKING WING



Taking Wing

ELA PATEL'S BUTTERFLY GARDEN IS AN ECOLOGICAL MODEL FOR WINDSOR MEMBERS AND THE COMMUNITY-AT-LARGE.

WRITTEN BY MELISSA KAREN SANCES

“I’ve loved butterflies since I was really young,” says Ela Patel, the 11-year-old largely responsible for Windsor’s Butterfly Garden. Thanks to an inspiring conversation she had with two Disney biologists, Ela’s passion became a mission to help imperiled butterflies, specifically the atala. “You know when they say, ‘When you build more gardens, more butterflies come?’” she asks. Well, since the garden opened last April, nearly a dozen species have made Windsor home.

Ela, along with her brother, Evan, 9; her mother, Dr. Sejal Patel; and her father, Dr. Vipul Patel, has been a part-time resident of Windsor since 2011. Windsor is her “actual” home, her fun home, while her “work” home is in Orlando, where the Patels met Drs. Anne Savage and Zak Gezon at Walt Disney World. Sejal was looking for ways her children could be more involved in local conservation. Savage told the family about a new initiative the Disney Conservation Fund launched this year to “Reverse the Decline” of 10 at-risk animals, including butterflies.

“Our goal is to work with a variety of organizations and private landowners to develop butterfly gardens and begin to introduce species back where appropriate,” says Savage, Disney’s Animals, Science & Environment conservation

The monarch butterfly is one of nearly 20,000 species of butterfly found world-wide. Along with bees, they are one of the most important pollinators for plants, fruits and vegetables on the planet.





“People think that if one or two species dies it’s not a bad thing, but it impacts a lot of plants, which then slowly impacts us.”

— ELA PATEL, FOUNDER OF WINDSOR’S BUTTERFLY GARDEN

director. The atala butterfly, once thought to be extinct in the 1960s and ‘70s, was at the top of the list.

The atala has made a comeback largely due to a focus on its host plant, coontie. Coontie is Florida’s only native cycad, an odd type of plant that has changed little since the times of the dinosaurs. Coontie is the only native plant on which the atala butterfly can lay its eggs. Years ago, Native Americans would dig the plant up and grind its roots to make flour. During World War I, settlers began harvesting the plant to support the troops, and the plant’s population crashed.

As a result, the atalas declined significantly. “This butterfly was thought to have gone extinct before the Endangered Species Act was even written,” says Gezon, conservation program manager of butterflies at Disney’s Animal Kingdom. Today the atala thrives between Melbourne and Miami.

Last January, the Patels approached David Blair, community association manager at Windsor, thinking the garden would take at least six months to build. “Within three weeks David said, ‘Do you have a list of plants? Because we’re going to put this all together,’” says Sejal. Savage and Gezon provided the Patels and Windsor a list of the plants, including host plants, and the butterflies that would likely be attracted or supported by the plants. Ela passed the list on to Blair and Elaine Erlanger of Hidden Garden, who ultimately designed it. Besides the coontie, nectar sources like Spanish needles are key to building a thriving garden.

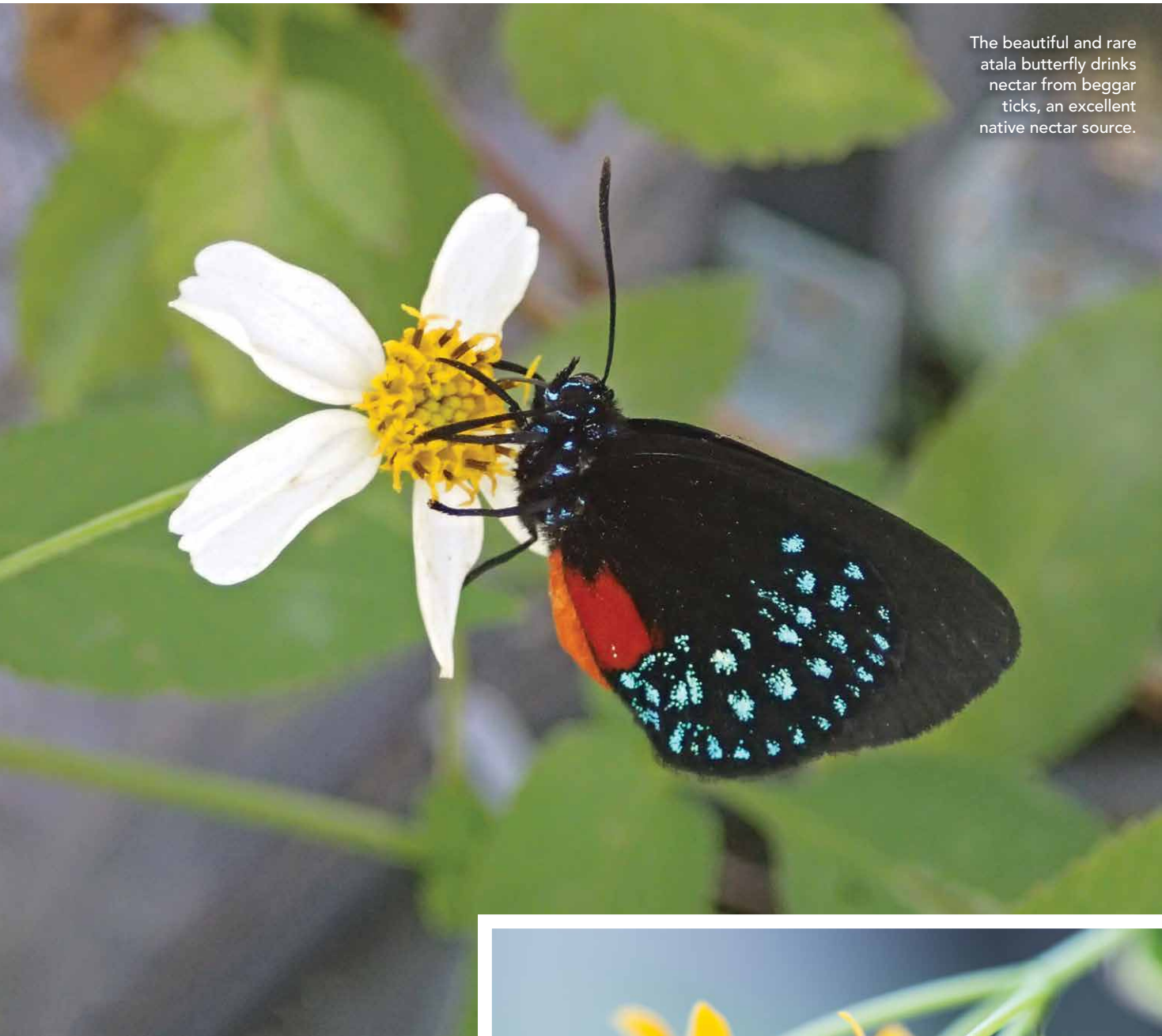
“Basically we kind of took whatever was out here and replaced it with a bunch of plants on the list,” says Ela of the garden. “Then we saw a couple of butterflies come. After that we released some.” Savage and Gezon and Ted Lund, club communications specialist, says they have released or seen monarchs, atalas, queens, zebra longwings, giant swallowtails, pipeline swallowtails, gold-rimmed swallowtails, gulf fritillaries and iulias.



Ela and her brother, Evan, worked closely with the Windsor staff to bring Windsor’s butterfly garden to fruition.

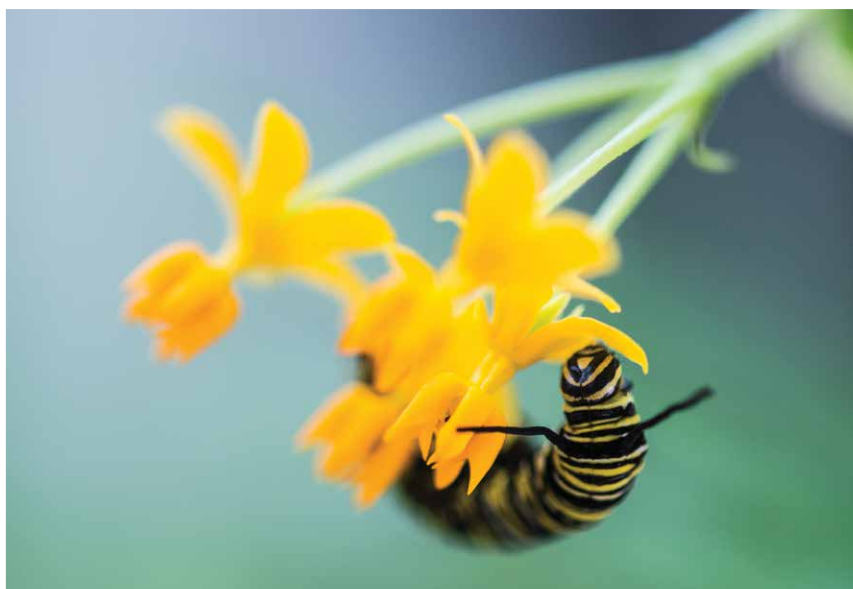


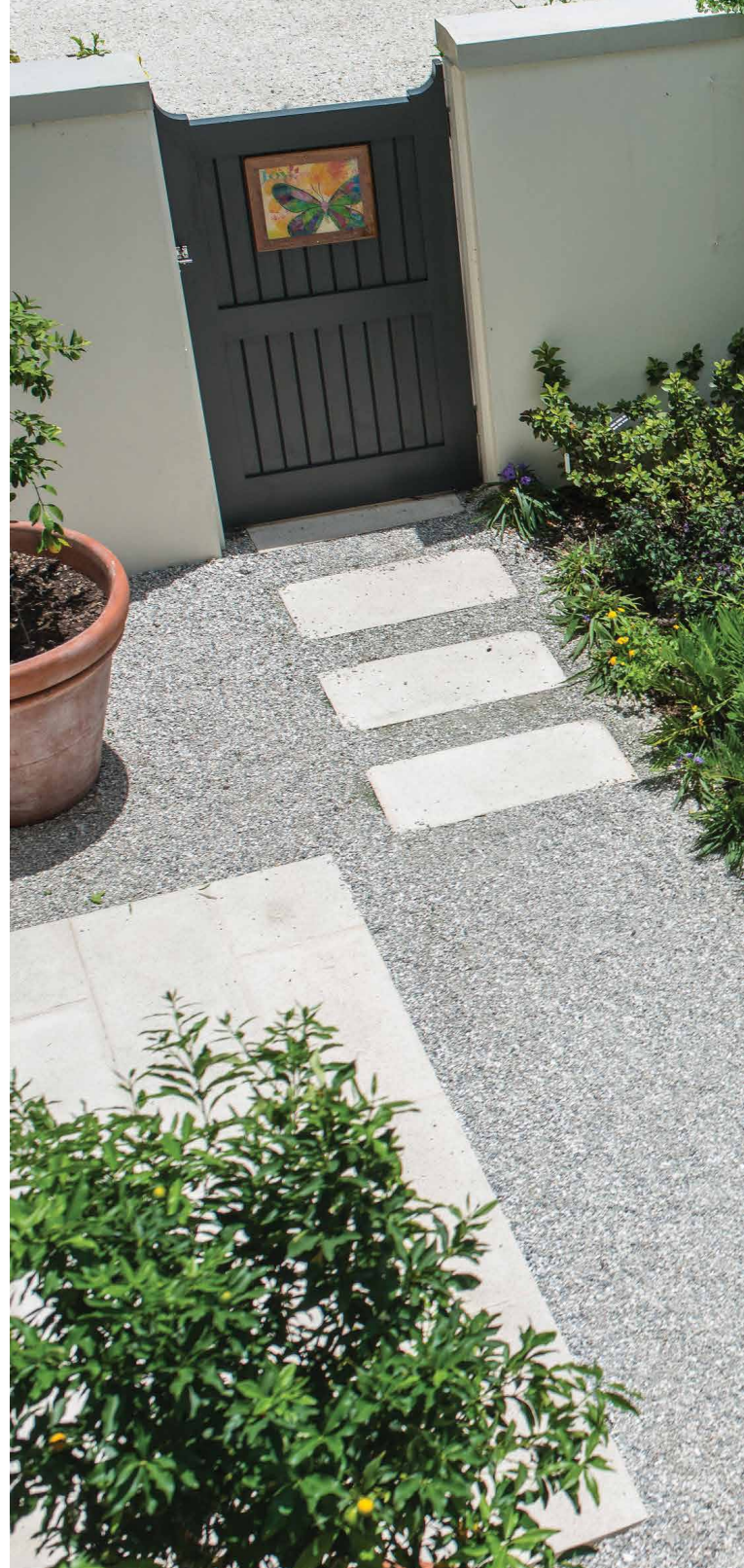
The caterpillar of the zebra longwing butterfly, Florida’s state butterfly, crawls along a passionvine, its host plant.



The beautiful and rare atala butterfly drinks nectar from beggar ticks, an excellent native nectar source.

A monarch butterfly caterpillar dines on milkweed, an important host plant for the species but also an important nectar provider for most butterflies and bees.





Windsor provided a wide variety of host and nectar plants for butterflies in its garden. It also incorporated water features, from which butterflies receive minerals necessary for their survival.



While Ela was the brainchild behind the garden, Sejal is grateful to Windsor for bringing it to fruition. “Ela and Evan had such an interest in conservation as they always have growing up in Florida, but it was really the entire community that said this is a great idea to be proactive and create a really tranquil respite for the community,” she says.

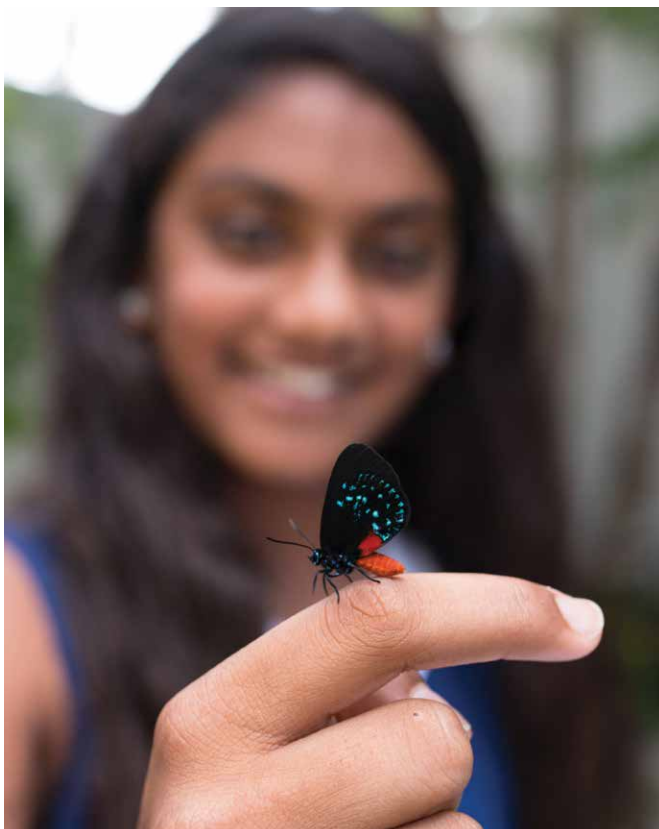
Lund was blown away by the reception at the opening. Since April, at least two members have planted their own butterfly

gardens. “It is starting to make a difference,” says Sejal.

After a garden was planted at Disney’s Vero Beach Resort, a blogger reported she had seen atalas – for the first time in years. “When she [the blogger] got in touch with Dr. Savage and Dr. Gezon, they emailed that it started with the initial release here,” Sejal says. Windsor hopes their community initiative will inspire more members to build gardens at their homes. “We’ve had a lot of inquiries since then about who we used and how we did it,”



Ela and Evan Patel prepare to release atala butterflies at the grand opening of the Windsor butterfly garden. These butterflies were bred at Disney's Animal Kingdom for release in Windsor's butterfly garden as part of the conservation effort to reverse its population declines.



Butterflies often land on the first thing they come to when released, in this case Ela's finger, to rest and gather their bearings.

says Blair.

Gezon calls the project "phenomenal" because "it doesn't just attract butterflies; it supports the populations and it has a really meaningful impact on local ecology. It's such a cool way for kids to get involved in nature's restoration."

Butterflies are pollinators that are integral to seed and fruit production. "Without pollinators we would lose about 75 percent of our food," Ela explains. "People think that if one or two species dies it's not a bad thing, but it impacts a lot of plants, which then slowly impacts us."

"And butterflies are a flagship species; so when there is a problem within the ecosystem, because of the quick life cycle of the butterfly, you'll actually see the peaks and troughs in their

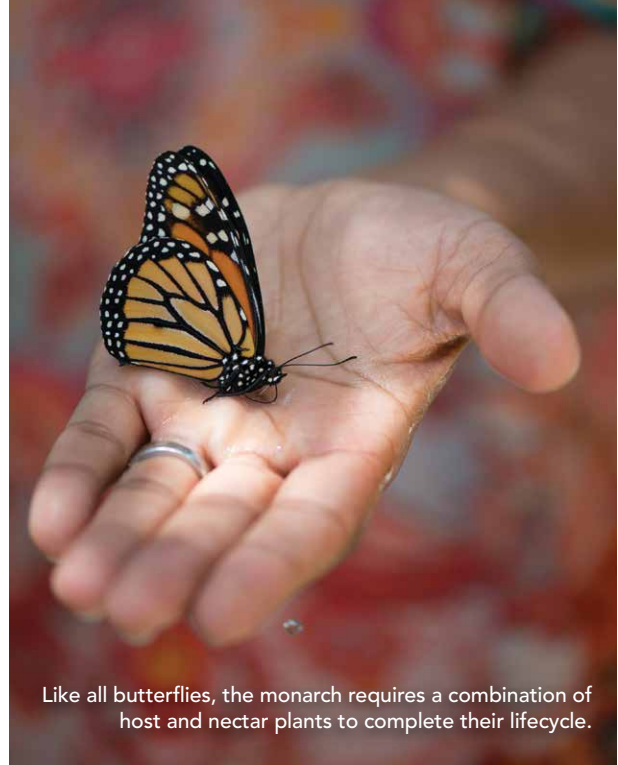
CREATING AN ATALA HABITAT

“Butterflies are just this phenomenal combination of being ecologically important and being beautiful and approachable,” says Gezon. “One of the reasons they are in peril around the world is that they are so sensitive to habitat loss. But they are also just as sensitive to habitat gain.”

There are two basics to building an atala habitat:

PLANT COONTIE. Make sure the plants are not treated with pesticides. Atala caterpillars will feed on these plants, so place them in an area where it is okay for the plants to appear chewed.

PLANT NECTAR SOURCES. Native plants are best, and adult atala tend to like white, daisy-like flowers such as Spanish needles and sweet almond.



Like all butterflies, the monarch requires a combination of host and nectar plants to complete their lifecycle.



Front Row: Jane Smalley, Ela, Sejal and Evan Patel

Back Row: Ted Lund, Dr. Anne Savage, Dr. Zak Gezon, Windsor General Manager Robert Gallagher.



A group of Windsor butterfly admirers observe a monarch just before release at the grand opening of the club's butterfly garden.

reproductive capacity,” explains Sejal. “When you see the population of butterflies drop, you know that there’s an insult somewhere else in the ecosystem; and it can help you predict something on a greater level. Realizing the impact they have on our ever-changing ecosystem is incredible.”

According to some of the budding butterfly gardens in Windsor, the butterflies may have a positive effect on their host plants. “The interesting thing about butterfly gardens is that generally you grow gardens for things not to eat them, but that’s the opposite with this,” says Lund. “People were calling to say there’s something wrong with the plants, and they came back with such a vengeance. So there’s also a relationship with host plants in terms of vibrancy and resiliency.”

As part of a partnership with the University of Florida and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Disney provides the Wings over Florida program as an

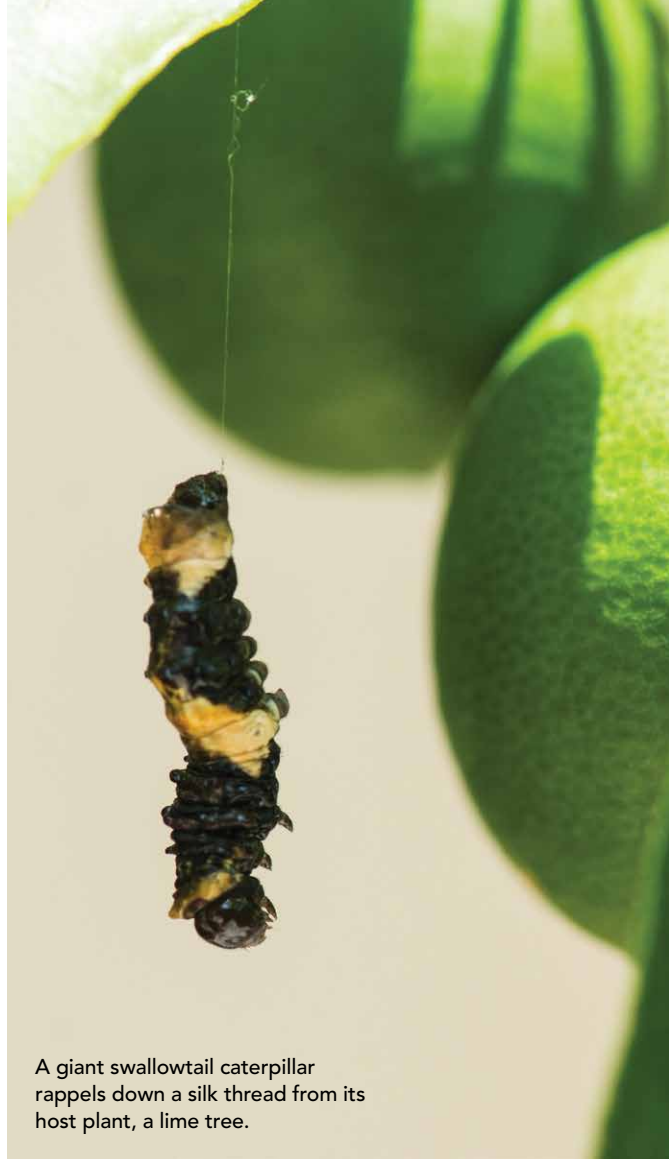


Evan Patel enjoys a moment with an atala butterfly before it takes flight.

incentive opportunity for children and adults to connect with nature and observe butterflies. What started off as a bird-watching list now rewards guests for spending time outdoors identifying 10 or more species of butterflies.

Windsor looks forward to its coming season with an established garden and lots of related children's programming. "It is such a great way to get our younger generation focused on what's really important, which is conservation and the environment around them," says Sejal. "As we move into a media technology age, as we have all of these other areas for children to grow into, to bring them back to nature and the environment and teach them how to protect the environment for their generation, that's invaluable."

Savage agrees. "Giving kids opportunities to engage in something that's really cool and where they feel they're making a difference can be lifechanging." 🌱



A giant swallowtail caterpillar rappels down a silk thread from its host plant, a lime tree.

A BUTTERFLY'S PARADISE

Some of the plants butterflies thrive on include:

- Bloodberry
- Drummond's phlox
- Firebush
- Golden dewdrop
- Indian blanket
- Lanceleaf tickseed
- Leavenworth's tickseed
- Orange coneflower
- Scarlet sage
- Spanish needles
- Spotted beebalm
- Wild lantana

