

THE GIANT OF SWALLOWTAILS

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Summer is for butterflies and one that most people have seen in their landscape or floating through their flowers is the giant swallowtail. Like all swallowtails, it is an exotic-looking butterfly that catches your eye. While beautiful to look at, the caterpillar stage of this insect can be considered a minor citrus pest. Beloved by butterfly enthusiasts, and bemoaned by backyard citrus growers, the giant swallowtail or “orangedog” is a beauty and a beast.

With female giant swallowtails having a wingspan measuring up to three inches in length, this colorful insect is hard to miss. Strong flyers, giant swallowtails have black wings with yellow bars on top and yellow underneath. Additionally, the “swallow tail” of this swallowtail has some yellow on it with a red patch and blue banding on

the hind wings. The caterpillar of the giant swallowtail is called the orangedog. The early stages of the caterpillar actually mimic a bird dropping – something that both predators and human beings would be hesitant to touch. As the caterpillar grows, it begins to take on the appearance of a snake which offers further mistaken identity protection. In addition to this camouflage, the caterpillar can also push out a Y-shaped gland from the base of its head with which it wipes a nasty stinking liquid similar in scent to rancid butter on its attacker. The brown pupae chrysalis finishes the life cycle with up to three generations occurring each year.

Attracting this butterfly to your garden is easy. Nectar sources favored by the giant swallowtail include bougainvillea, honeysuckle and golden-

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rod. Nectar sounds like a sensible enough food, but also consider that they also gather nourishment by sipping liquid from manure!

Giant swallowtails love to eat plants in the citrus family. This particular taste can range from the lime pricklyash to our back yard citrus trees. Orangedogs on mature citrus don't do that much damage to the overall tree and can be tolerated. However, on newly planted citrus, a couple of swallowtail caterpillars can defoliate a small, young plant and this situation may require some intervention on your part. Nature has some biological controls already in place to suppress these caterpillars which include parasitic wasps and flies. However, handpicking is also an easy

and convenience practice. Always keeping in mind least-toxic control methods, the next step up might be Bt or *Bacillus thuringiensis* used as per label instructions. This insecticide controls only caterpillars which makes it a very good selective choice.

Despite some minor pest problems associated with the giant swallowtail, when all is said and done, these magnificent butterflies are a great addition as "flying flowers" in your landscape.

Resources:

- McAuslane, H.J. (2009) *Giant Swallowtail, Orangedog, Papilio cressphontes*. UF/IFAS Extension Service.

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