

## **Easy rearing instructions for mourning cloak butterfly:**

The caterpillars of mourning cloaks eat the leaves of a wide array of trees and shrubs. Some of their more common host plants include assorted willows, aspens, and cottonwoods, elms, and paper birch.

Daily, keep putting in fresh leaves, and allow the caterpillar time to crawl on to the new leaf before removing the old leaf. Repeat this process until the caterpillar is shedding into the second instar (every time they shed their skin, it is called an instar) that usually takes one week. If you notice moisture developing on the top and sides of the container, make very tiny holes in the lid for ventilation, and wipe away excess moisture.

Never disturb a caterpillar that is attached to a leaf or on the sides or top of the container: the caterpillar may be in the process of shedding its skin.

The second week, the caterpillar is now getting too big for the small hatching container. It is time to put it in something bigger. You may want to have an intermediate stage at this point and put the caterpillar into a cottage cheese container or one of equivalent size. Poke small air holes to reduce the build up of moisture in the container.

Offer fresh food often, and remove old food and droppings at the same time as well! Wash container if needed when adding fresh food. Watch for excess moisture. Always dry food-stock before offering to your caterpillar. As your caterpillar grows into 4th and 5th instars it will require more care, sometimes replacing leaves one to three times a day! Remove droppings every time also. At this time, it is recommended you move your caterpillar into a screened container for better ventilation. We offer several sizes and styles of insect rearing chambers, starting at \$9.95. Making a small watertight vase to hold the stems of food plant will keep food fresh in between feedings. Never let the leaves dry out.

As your caterpillar gets older, it will begin to pupate. You will usually see a large pile of digested leaves, and runny stool as the caterpillar prepares to turn into a chrysalis. At this time (if you have the caterpillar in a smooth-sided container), place some sticks into the container that span from top to bottom; mourning cloaks like to attach to a stick while pupating.

When they have reached full size the caterpillars go on "walkies"; that is, they leave the host plant where they have been feeding in search of a site to pupate. Like most caterpillars, they seek to distance themselves from the site where they were last feeding and pooping, as this evidence will be apparent to potential predators.

Once it has found a suitable spot, the caterpillar will spin a small anchor pad of silk, and attach its hind end to the pad, then hang, head down, for about a day. ("Going J" we call it, as it hangs with its head down but curled up like the letter J). Then the caterpillar sheds its skin one last time to enter the pupal stage. The pupa wriggles out of the caterpillar skin and works a small hook-like appendage (the cremaster) into the pad of silk, which firmly anchors it in place. In several hours, it will have hardened into a spiky grey chrysalis.

Your mourning cloak will hatch from its chrysalis in 10 to 15 days. Release it within the second day. Adults live 10-11 months, and might be one of our longest living butterflies.

The adult butterflies will occasionally come to flowers for nectar, but it is thought that most of their sustenance comes from sap or decaying fruit. Using tree sap as food would explain why mourning cloaks could gain some advantage from arising so early from hibernation. When the sap starts to rise in spring it often seeps out of the bark in places where the tree has been damaged over the winter. In summer, you will often find them at fresh holes in trees left by drilling sapsuckers (a kind of woodpecker). In addition, like many other butterflies, they will extract salts or other nutrients from mud puddles or even from animal droppings (poops).

*We hope you enjoy the process of watching your caterpillar grow into a beautiful adult mourning cloak butterfly. All of our livestock are deemed healthy at time of purchase. If you loose your caterpillar in spite of your best efforts, some loss is normal. We do not offer a refund or replacement of lepidoptera. The costs are low, the educational experience priceless, not matter the outcome. Please feel free to call us if you have any questions that have not been answered here.*