

J.J. Cardinal's Info

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Raising caterpillars

"Leps" is a cool way to refer to butterflies and moths. It is short for *Lepidoptera*, the Greek word for the order of butterflies, moths, and skippers. The appreciation of leps is recorded as far back as the Bronze Age, since the dawn of civilization. Raising butterflies and moths is cool.

Materials you will need for rearing:

- Plastic container with lid for eggs and young larvae. Poke very small holes in container for ventilation. If moisture develops, wipe dry.
- Paper towel cut to fit container.
- Fresh "host" plant leaves, washed and dried. Keep refrigerated until used.
- Mesh (screened) container for older larvae. We offer a variety of reusable-screened zippered tents starting at \$8.95 that are perfect for rearing caterpillars.

Day one:

- Place egg (if you purchased an egg) in a plastic, lidded container.
- Keep warm, but out of direct sunlight.

Day two and until hatching:

- Continue to keep warm and out of direct sunlight.
- Wait eight to thirteen days for caterpillar to emerge.

Day of hatching:

- When caterpillar hatches, place a washed and dried fresh host plant leaf next to caterpillar.



Polyphemus silk moth

One week to five weeks old:

- Increase feedings to ensure caterpillar always has fresh leaves as appetite increases.
- Change soiled paper toweling twice daily when necessary.

Detailed information:

If you purchased an egg, it may hatch in eight to thirteen days or sooner depending on temperature and humidity. Keep container out of direct sun, and in a warm location. If you have an air conditioned home, the emergence may take much longer. Grow lights help.

The newly emerged caterpillar will be hard to see; it is only 1/8 of an inch long. It will be predominantly yellow or green throughout the five instars (shedding of the skin), and spend roughly one week in each stage except the longer fifth stage. You will also notice the caterpillar becoming somewhat inactive as it prepared to shed its skin. When the caterpillar has shed its skin, you may see the remains of it along with its full-face plate intact. The caterpillar will some-

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times eat its skin. Do not attempt to move the caterpillar during this time, to do so could be harmful or even fatal.

It is recommended you do not handle the caterpillar at any time. If you need to move the caterpillar during cleaning of the cage or offering fresh leaves, tear the surrounding material the caterpillar is on and transport the caterpillar to the new surface, or use a round, natural bristle, clean paint brush to gently nudge it onto the new surface. It is recommended you change the paper toweling and caterpillar droppings daily, twice daily when the caterpillar is full-grown. Always wash and rinse your hands well before and after handling the caterpillar.

After the caterpillar is two weeks old, you can move it to a mesh container. Remember to keep humidity around the container high by placing a moist cotton ball in container if needed. You can lightly mist the outside of the container if needed. At this time, make sure you have at least three leaves at all times for the caterpillar. You can put stems of leaves in a wet paper towel and seal in plastic bag to keep leaves fresh if necessary in between feedings.

When your caterpillar is full-grown, it will become very quiet and not eat for a few days; it is getting ready to transform into a pupa! Some caterpillars will use a leaf to wrap into a cocoon, others will descend into whatever ground protection (paper towels) they can find to use as to make a cocoon. You may notice a runny stool before cocooning—it is "clearing its waste." When you see this, you may think your caterpillar is sick; it is not, this is normal.

Some cocoons are papery thin and pupae outlines can easily be seen when the cocoon is held up to a bright light. After your caterpillar cocoons remove all foodstuffs. Adult silk moths do not have any eating mouthparts. Allow cocoon to lie on the floor of the container out of direct sunlight. Your moth should emerge in twenty to thirty days depending on temperature and humidity conditions; some overwinter in as a cocoon and

emerge in spring. Add to the rearing container a few sticks especially if the container you are using has smooth sides.

Most of the leps we have raised have enclosed (emerged) in the late morning hours. You may hear a rustling sound as the moth claws itself out of its cocoon. You will notice your newly emerged moth will have a huge abdomen; the abdomen contains all the fluid necessary to pump up the wings. Some adults crawl up a stick, others will attach themselves to the side of the container so they can open their wings. It is very important you do not disturb the moth at this time. The moth should fully expand its wings within a few hours; drying and hardening of the wings takes 12—24 hours.

Adult moths emerge with enough body fat to sustain it through this life cycle, which lasts seven to ten days. Enjoy watching the moth and release it within two days in the evening hours, after birds are inactive. If it is a windy, rainy or very cool day call for advice on what to do.

Listed below are some primary food plants for polyphemus and Cynthia.

For polyphemus: Red maple, white/paper birch, box elder, striped maple, silver maple, serviceberry, hickory, chestnut, gray dogwood, hawthorns, black walnut, poplars, aspens, plum, white oak, red oak, pin oak, black oak, all willows, sassafras, and grape.

For Cynthia: Forsythia, ash, black walnut, privet, elder, lilac, and many others.



Cynthia silk moth