

Caterpillars on Coneflowers

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The silvery checkerspot caterpillar, *Chlosyne nycteis*, can be found right now, happily eating away on sunflower, aster, Echinacea, goldenrod and Rudbeckia. The checkerspot caterpillar has branched spines on its back that are black in color. Sometimes the caterpillars will have an orange stripe or two. Depending on weather conditions, there will be one to two generations per year. Once first generation caterpillars are an inch long, they will stop feeding and form a pupal case on foliage. As the growing season winds down, the second generation caterpillars will hibernate as third instar larvae.

The adult silvery checkerspot is a beautiful black, yellow and orange butterfly that is on the small side, with a wingspan around two inches across. The black border on the wings will be edged with white dots. The females are more brilliantly colored than the males and males will have knobs at the end of the antennae, which helps them to find females. This butterfly is a pollinator, feeding on flower nectar of the milkweed and red clover.

If gardeners can tolerate the loss of foliage on their plants, then by all means let the checkerspot caterpillars have at it because their population stability may be vulnerable. Caterpillar feeding tends not to destroy plants but there will be a lot of missing foliage. Where their feeding damage is a concern, grow an extra plant or two of their preferred chow and “herd” them by carefully breaking off the portion of the leaf they are on and placing it in the midst of their designated forage plant. Harmony!