

FLORIDA'S SECRET JEWELS

The Native Species of Clematis

by Frederick B. Essig

The name "clematis" conjures up images of big, spectacular blue or purple blossoms growing on luxuriant vines in places far away from Florida's sultry summer heat. To be sure, most cultivated varieties of clematis were developed for temperate gardens and fizzle quickly when imported to the subtropics. Yet the genus *Clematis* consists of hundreds of species that are found in varied habitats from alpine meadow to tropical rain forest. Some of the tropical species, which can become substantial lianas (vines), are too cold-sensitive to survive in central

Florida, but there are many subtropical to warm-temperate species that ought to grow nicely in the Sunshine State. Few, however, have been tested.

There are actually 6 species of clematis native to Florida. One of them, *C. virginiana*, is a rampant, almost weedy vine, native to eastern North America, that is spreading along road cuts and disturbed areas in central Florida. It produces masses of small white flowers in late summer, followed by

heads of feathery-tailed achenes (seeds) at the end of the season. A more restrained relative, *C. catesbyana*, has similar flowers in mid-summer, and can be found in the wild mainly on limestone outcrops and sinkholes. Both species are readily cultivated and require little care, other than to keep them in bounds!

The other 4 species native to our state have bell or urn shaped flowers in delicate shades of blue, pink, purple, or magenta, that are pollinated by bumblebees. These vines die down in the winter and resprout vigorously in the spring. They are rarely grown, even by wildflower enthusi-



photo by Frederick B. Essig

Clematis catesbyana's delicate white blossoms appear in mid-summer.

asts, and remain some of Florida's best kept wildflower secrets. Two of these species are vigorous, attractive vines that produce an abundance of flowers in mid-summer.

Clematis glaucophylla is a relatively rare species in the wild, found only in the floodplain of the Apalachicola River in northern Florida and Georgia. If grown in full sun, it produces luxuriant foliage and waxy pink and green blossoms in summer. The most attractive of our native species, it can be grown quite readily in rich, well-watered soil, climbing quickly in the spring to the top of a trellis or chain-link fence.

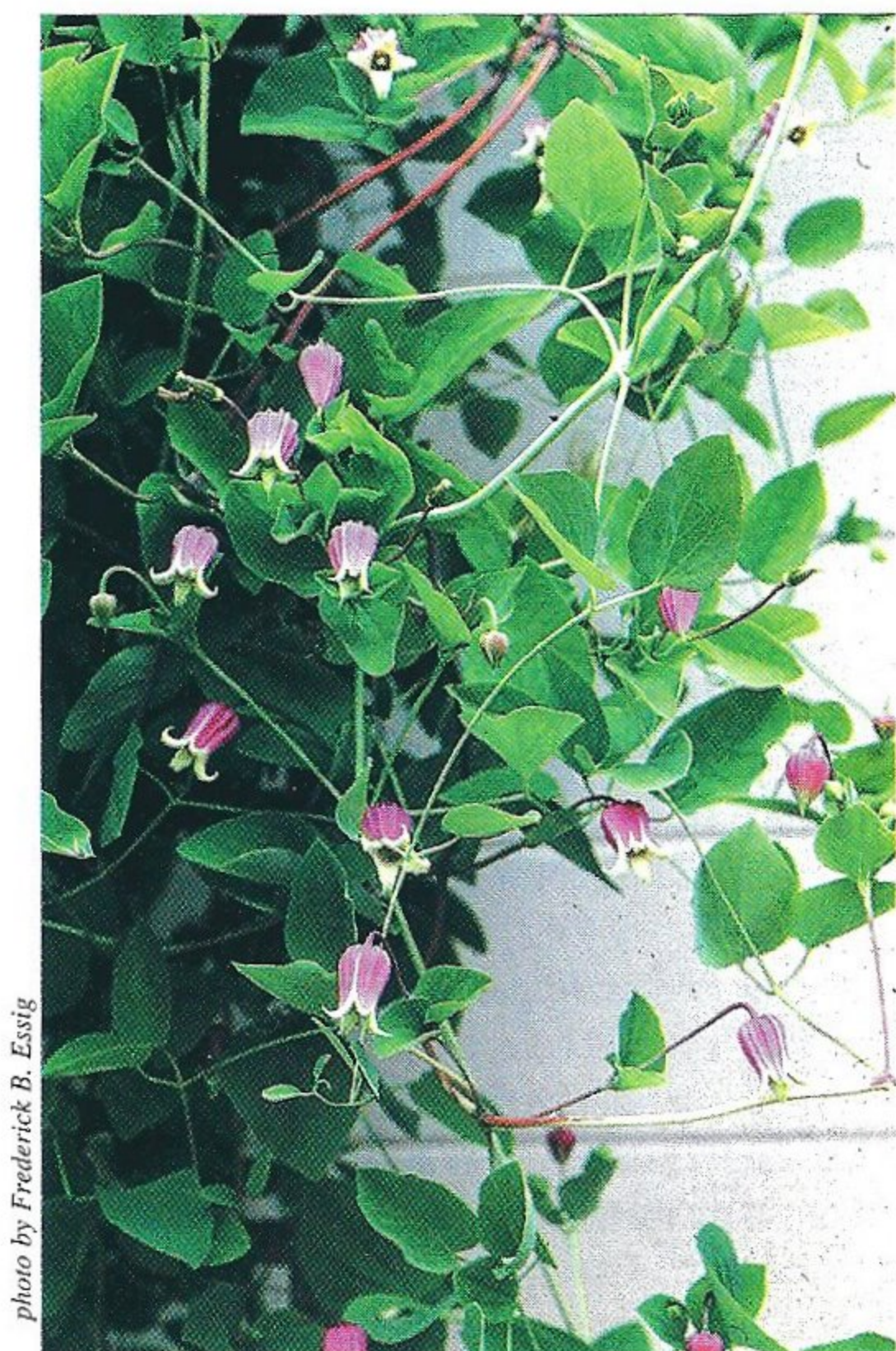
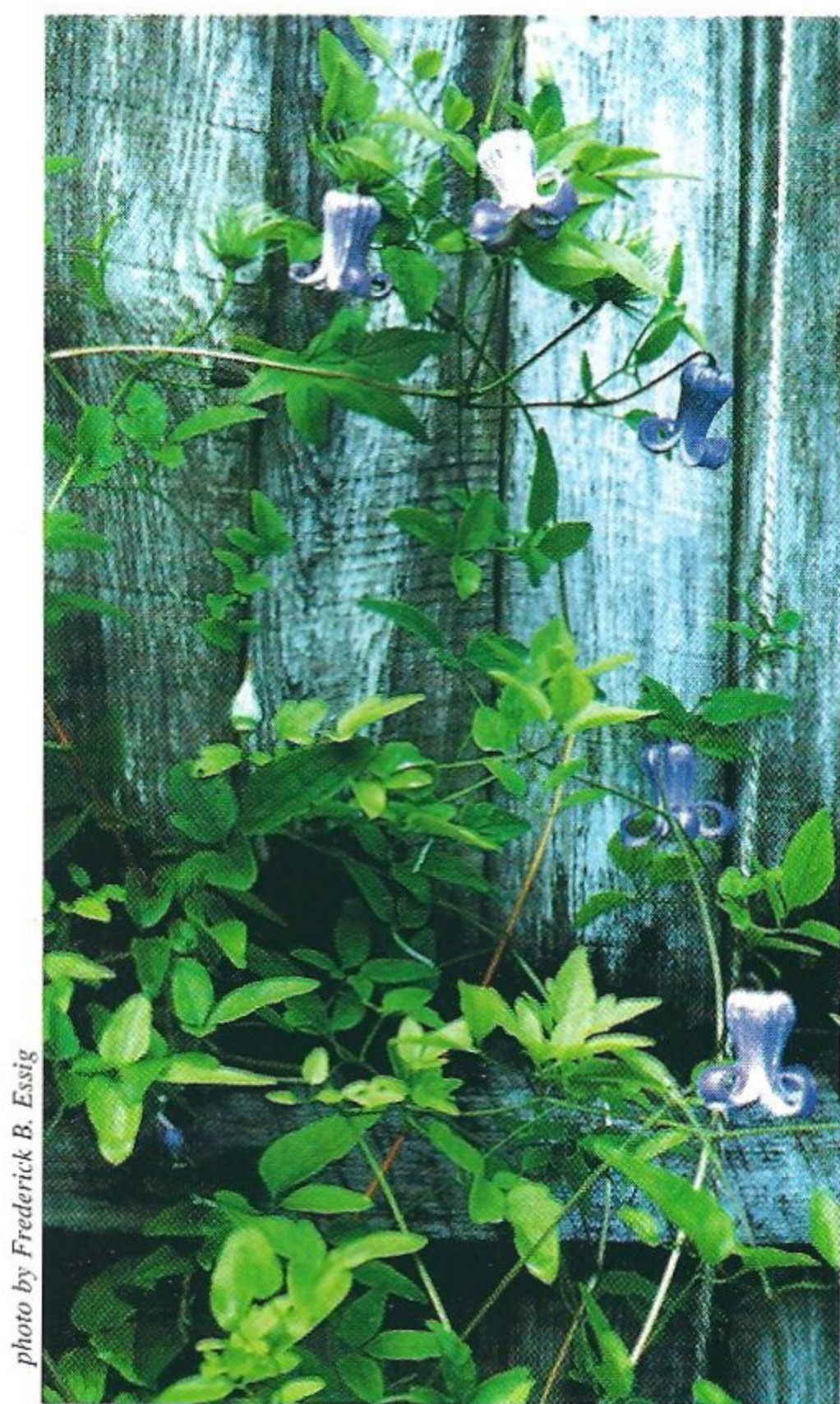


photo by Frederick B. Essig

The pink bells and lush foliage of *Clematis glaucophylla*.



Clematis crispa grows in boggy soil near rivers.

The other native easily cultivated is *Clematis reticulata*, found in dry woods throughout the state. Although rarely noticed in the wild, when planted along a fence it can produce a striking display of small, purple, bell-shaped flowers throughout the summer. It requires virtually no care, surviving for years on



The feathery achenes of *Clematis reticulata*

natural rainfall and the sparse nutrients found in our sandy soil. Modest fertilization and watering just make it all the more luxuriant. After the blooms, the vines are covered with pinwheel-like heads of feathery-tailed achenes.

Other species require a more specialized habitat. *Clematis crispa* is found along rivers and prefers soil that is always damp. Beautiful blue flowers are produced very sparingly throughout the summer. It is of limited use as a landscape plant, but can be grown in a tub as a conversation piece. Hybridization of this species with *C. reticulata* results in a vigorous, hardy plant similar to the latter species, but with flowers somewhat larger and more like *C. crispa*.

Clematis baldwinii, sometimes called pine hyacinth, is found sparingly in pine flatwoods or in grassy areas along roadsides. It is unusual in that it is not a vine. The plants are sometimes erect, sometimes rather floppy, and 1-2 feet tall. Beautiful pink to blue flowers are produced in March. Their short stature and non-vining habit suggest that they might be bred into interesting border plants for flower beds.

Many wildflower enthusiasts enjoy growing these species just as they come from nature - as unpretentious, delicate jewels. The ease with which the various species can be hybridized, however, suggests a large, untapped potential for developing striking new horticultural varieties suitable for growing in subtropical areas. A relative of the Florida species *Clematis texensis* has already been bred with some of

the large-flowered temperate varieties, imparting to them its brilliant red color.

Clematis species are not difficult to grow in pots or outdoors, if given sufficient water, ample sunlight, and, for the vining species, something to climb on. Seed can be very slow to germinate, especially in species with bell-shaped flowers. Generally, if planted fresh in the fall, germination will begin in the spring, but may take longer.

Finding seed of these native species is still something of an adventure. Some may be obtained from native plant nurseries, from botanical gardens, or in the yards of native plant enthusiasts.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

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AFFN Native Plant & Service Directory, the guide to Florida native plant sources, landscape architects, biologists, designers, and restoration specialists. Published by the Association of Florida Native Nurseries, www.afnn.org. \$5 (includes shipping & handling). Send name and address with check payable to: AFNN, PO Box 434, Melrose, FL 32666.

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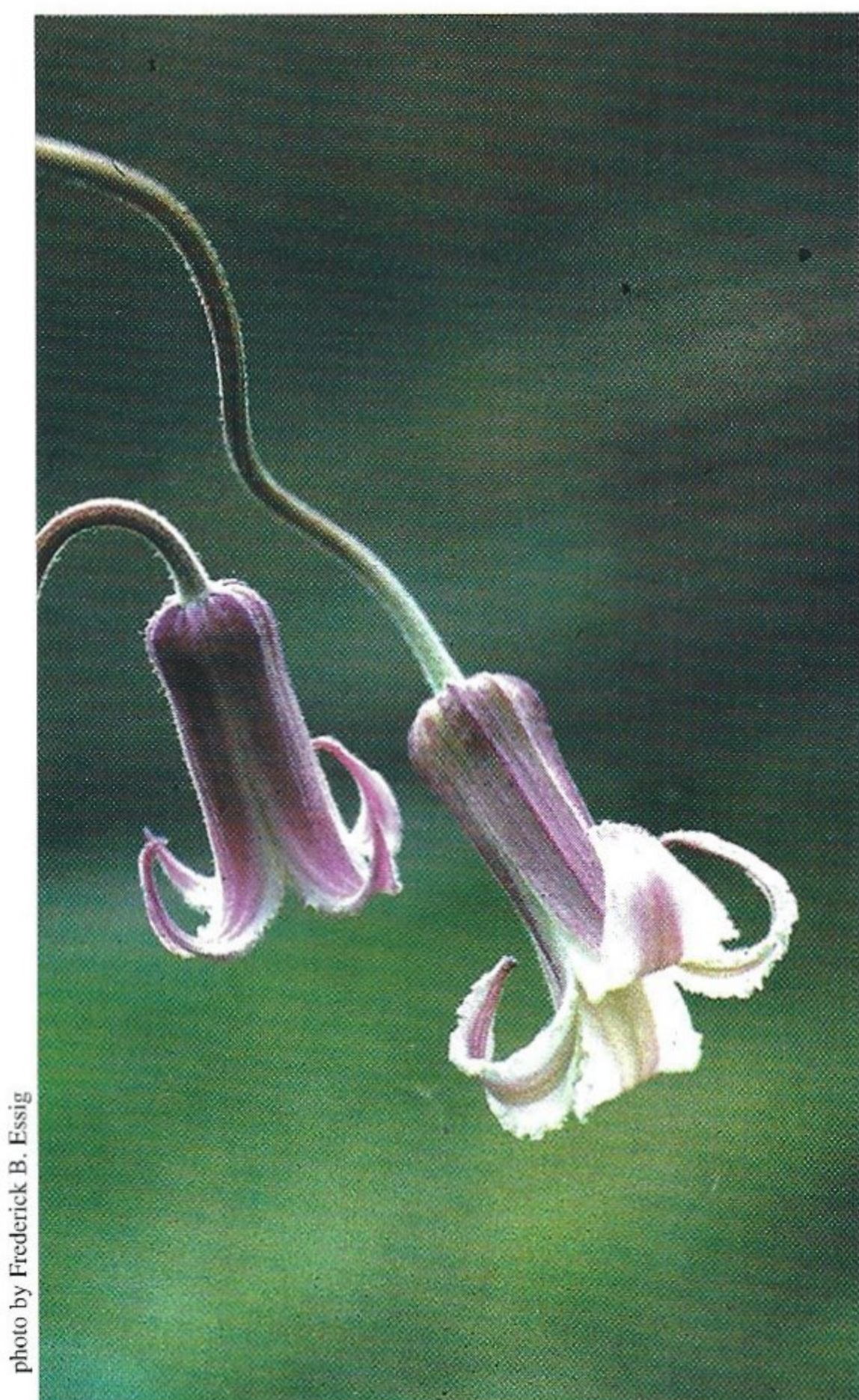


photo by Frederick B. Essig

Clematis baldwinii's short stature and non-vining habit suggest some interesting possibilities. See page 30.

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ON THE COVER

Creamy white magnolia blossoms will light up your nights. See page 12. (Photo by Kathy Nelson)

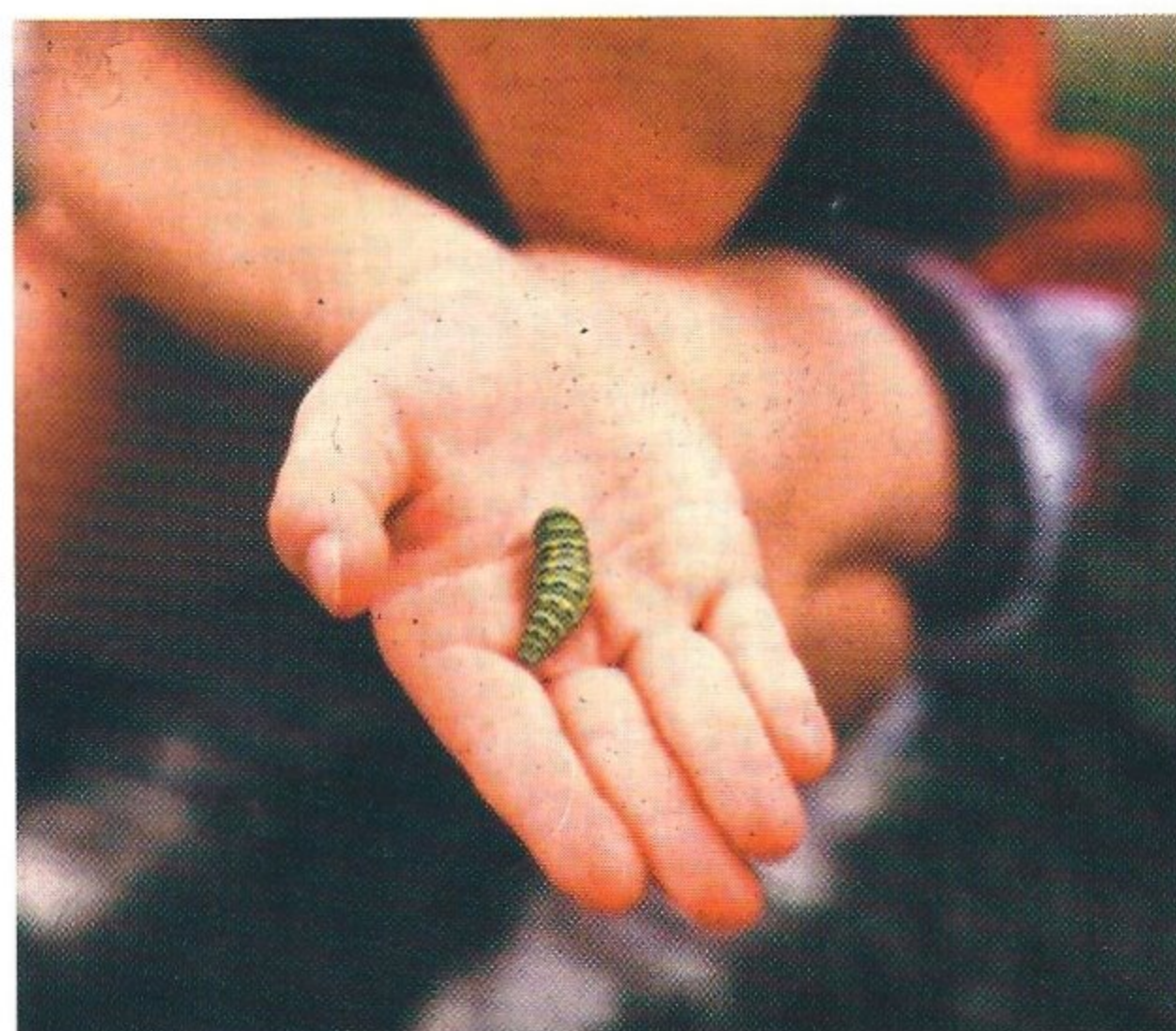


photo by Becky Wern

School butterfly gardens are educational, beautiful, and fun. See page 34.