

A Biodynamic Approach to Dealing with the Cabbage White Butterfly

I have heard that butterflies have become quite rare this year. Even though the buddleias, lilacs, jasmines and other flowering shrubs are now in full bloom, I have been told that many people are missing the sight of butterflies visiting their gardens.

It would be wonderful to hear some more encouraging news from you. Are you seeing plenty of butterflies in your garden? If so, please share some photos.

Personally, I only mow parts of my lawn. I enjoy seeing many flowers appear, including orchids, yarrow and white clover. I leave patches unmown, or mow them only occasionally, so the wildflowers can fully express themselves, gradually transforming what was once a croquet lawn, of which the previous owners were very proud, into a semi-wild meadow.

Lo and behold, I have seen some very rare butterfly species visiting and feeding on these flowers. Not only that, but the birds have also been happily feeding on the seeds during the breeding season.

Alas, in the vegetable garden, the white cabbage butterfly has also made its comeback after a cold and wet spring. It has decimated 50% of one of my Galician Perennial Kale plants while leaving the other five untouched.

A Biodynamic Approach to Protecting Brassicas from the White Cabbage Butterfly

In biodynamics, we work with the premise that when one species of insect or bird becomes dominant, it is often because there are too few other species of its kind present.

For example, if you have a pigeon problem, keeping and feeding doves in a dovecote can help discourage pigeons. The presence of the doves reduces the opportunity for pigeons to dominate the available space.

The same principle could be applied to butterflies or other species that might become pests.

In the case of butterflies, you could plant enough perennial and annual flowering species to provide plenty of nectar and attract a wide variety of butterfly species.

You could also plant plenty of flowering members of the brassica family, such as Virginia stock and nasturtiums, or allow your mustards to flower. These plants can distract the white cabbage butterfly, encouraging it to feed rather than breed.

It has been shown that well-fed animals breed less and therefore have less reason to feed on your cultivated plants.

Companion Planting

Another solution is to plant herbs alongside your cabbages to help camouflage their scent.

"What grows well together, eats well together."

Think of the traditional English combination of cabbage and mint, or making sauerkraut with caraway, dill or fennel.

You can also interplant cabbages with celery, celeriac, Florence fennel, leeks or onions.

Beneficial Predatory Insects

How can you attract beneficial predatory insects?

For example, parasitic braconid wasps lay their eggs on caterpillars. The eggs hatch, and the young wasps kill the butterfly caterpillars before they can complete their life cycle.

You can attract these wasps by planting yarrow, feverfew, chamomile, catnip and sweet alyssum around the edges of your garden beds.

Additionally, you can intersperse white clover amongst your brassicas. White clover is an excellent companion plant because it fixes nitrogen that leafy greens love while also attracting the wasps mentioned above, as well as lacewings.

All of these plants also attract a range of beneficial pollinators, making them a win-win addition to the garden.

Insecticidal Spray

A simple garlic spray can also help.

Crush or mash one garlic clove, place it in a bowl, pour over boiling water, and leave it to steep overnight (or for at least 8–10 hours). Strain the liquid thoroughly through a fine sieve or cheesecloth so that no pieces of garlic clog the spray nozzle.

Spray your plants thoroughly once a week, paying particular attention to the undersides of the leaves, and keep an eye on any damage.

White Cabbage Butterfly Ferment

If you still have a problem, here is another solution to help manage and deter the butterflies from decimating your crop.

Regularly check the undersides of your cabbage leaves and squash any yellow eggs you find.

If you miss that stage, collect the caterpillars, squash them, place them in a bucket of water, and allow them to ferment. This creates both a repellent and a foliar feed.

After two weeks, dilute the ferment at a ratio of 1:9 with water and mist it onto the leaves. It helps deter further butterfly attacks while also feeding the plants, encouraging extra growth to compensate for the earlier damage.

Good luck with your brassicas and with your journey towards creating greater harmony in the garden between cultivated plants and the natural fauna.

We look forward to hearing how you are getting on.

Happy summer gardening,

Hans-Günther