



Saturniid Moth Care Sheet

Saturniid moths comprise some of the largest moths and most beautiful moths in the world and make excellent subjects for observing the insect life cycle. Keep your small caterpillars in a plastic container lined with kitchen paper which soaks up any condensation. Keep at room temperature and out of direct sunlight with the lid on. They don't need air holes as the air is refreshed every time that you clean them out. Provide fresh cut food plant (e.g. privet for Atlas moths, Rhododendron for Moon moths) and maintain hygiene by changing the paper and the droppings each day. If you have many caterpillars, it is best to keep them in pairs in separate boxes to prevent disease spread. Avoid pulling a caterpillar off a leaf or twig, as it may be changing skin where it anchors its old skin to the leaf and wriggles out of it. In this case, it is advisable to cut around the leaf and place it back in the clean box.

The caterpillars will change their skins five times as they grow. They will stop eating for a couple of days before each skin change. Some caterpillars have problems getting out of their old skins – if this is the case, it would be a good idea to raise the humidity by spraying the leaves. Any caterpillars oozing dark fluid should be isolated immediately - these have succumbed to a virus and won't recover. As the caterpillars get larger, they will need bigger sprays of foliage to eat especially in their final instar. After 7 or 8 weeks, the caterpillars will be about thick as a man's thumb and they will start spinning a cocoon. First though, they will stop eating and void a mass of dark fluid.

They will spin their cocoons in the box using the leaves and twigs to build the structure. It is important not to change the direction of the box that the fresh cocoons are in for a few days. This is because the caterpillar usually leaves a hole in one end of the cocoon so the moth can make an easy exit. Changing the direction can lead to the caterpillar turning round in the cocoon to face the sealed end, giving problems on emergence. After a few days, the caterpillar changes into a pupa inside its cocoon. You can then place the cocoons at the bottom of a cardboard box or net with kitchen paper stapled to the sides. It is important that when the moth emerges that it has adequate space to climb up and expand its wings (up to 11 inches with Atlas moths). Spray the cocoons occasionally especially if kept in a dry room.

The moths take 5-6 weeks to emerge depending on temperature but MANY will go through the winter and larger species may come out in June or July the next year when the weather is warmer. The wings take up to an hour to expand. They can squirt a pink fluid out (meconium) when the moth is first disturbed so it is best to keep them in the box for the first day. After that, keep them in as large a space as possible e.g. bathroom. The adult moths will live up to two weeks, longer if kept cool, and are relatively easy to look after. It is against the law to release exotic moths into the wild. They need no feeding and live off stored fats in the body, as they have done in their pupal stage. For this reason, the adult moths are relatively sedentary compared to our native moths. Unless you have seen an active pairing take place, most eggs that are laid will be infertile. These moths can lay up to 100 eggs, so please think before leaving a female in the same room as a male!