



### **Rare and endangered Atala**

We shrieked like little girls at the sight of the red and yellow caterpillars on the coontie in Butterfly Garden #1. We began to count 1, 2, 3 and so on.

The story of how the rare and endangered Atala butterflies finally made it to the Butterfly Gardens at VillageWalk is truly one of environmental resource sharing. It all started about 5 years ago when Linda Blaise traveled to Montgomery Botanical Center in Coral Gables to obtain caterpillars of Atala butterflies for our Butterfly Gardens. In preparation, the Atala's host plant coontie was planted en masse throughout all 10 Butterfly Gardens. The butterflies arrived, were released and were never seen again. Meanwhile, the coontie continued to thrive, just waiting for the day it could host its favorite butterfly.

As we know, Amy Swanson has quite the reputation for raising caterpillars. Amy acquired 6 new Atala caterpillars she brought to the butterfly habitat at her home. 5 of the 6 enclosed (emerged) into beautiful butterflies that she then released into Garden #1. A few weeks later CELEBRATION! The coontie in Garden #1 hosted 6 more hungry Atala caterpillars. All 6 enclosed in Amy's habitat and were again released into the gardens.

The Atala butterfly was incredibly abundant in South Florida then nearly extinct due to the decline of its host plant caused by over harvesting the root of the coontie for starch production by early settlers. Today in some areas of South FL the caterpillars are considered a pest because of the foliar damage done by the caterpillars. Needless to say though, our Butterfly Gardens look forward to more and more of the Atala finding and consuming our coontie.

Sharing between like-minded conservation organizations and individuals can have positive results. In this case it is a little black and red butterfly that likes coontie.

Submitted by the Education Committee

In collaboration with Amy Swanson