

SILKWORM INFORMATION SHEET

Silkworms (*Bombyx mori*) have a fascinating history that dates back many centuries. Entire civilizations have been built around the saliva of these caterpillars (their saliva is what hardens into strands of silk). They are fascinating to watch, easy to rear, and for better or worse, you do not have to worry about what do with the adult moths (adults emerge from their cocoons, mate, lay eggs and expire in a relatively short period).

Caterpillar stage: Silkworms eat mulberry leaves until they spin cocoons - it is about that simple. Just place the silkworms in a container (small clear plastic pet containers with breathing, hinged lids work great), keep at a temperature of 73-85 degrees, and replenish the mulberry leaves as they are consumed. Do not let them run out of food for more than 2-3 hours. Place paper towels on the bottom to absorb droppings. When the caterpillars reach about 2-3 inches long, put some paper towel cores, cut into 3 inch sections, in the cage. Silkworms will often crawl into these to spin their cocoon.

Cocoon stage: When ready (about a month after hatching from eggs), silkworms begin to spit out a thin strand of saliva that hardens into what we call silk (yes, those silk scarves and ties are nothing more than colorful silkworm spit). Try not to disturb the cocoon until about 3 days after you see no more activity. You can then take the cocoons out, lay them down on a paper towel in a suitable container, and wait for the adults to emerge (about 12-14 days after they start spinning cocoons).

Adult stage: Adults emerge by dissolving part of the cocoon. You may notice a red colored material near where they emerge - this is not silkworm blood but rather a release of waste fluids - remember they have been in a cocoon for quite a while with no restroom facilities. Males (antenna are much fuzzier than the females) will then look for a "calling" female (she releases chemicals that "call" the male). After mating, females will soon lay 200-500 eggs on the paper towel material and then shortly thereafter, pass away. Adults have no feeding mouthparts, so it is useless to try and extend their life with any form of food.

Egg stage: Silkworms can be continuously reared, but it is best to let the eggs undergo a period of dormancy. Simply place in the refrigerator for a month in an area that is cool but does not freeze (the vegetable hydrator, for example). Many generations can be raised in this fashion. For additional references on silkworms, please visit our website – simply type the word silkworms into the search function.

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