

WANTED
ALIVE IN YOUR GARDEN
 Question Mark Caterpillar

By Text and photos by Jane Hurwitz

Known Food Preferences: Trees in the Elm Family, including American Elm, Slippery Elm, Winged Elm and hackberries, as well as the herbaceous species Common Hop, Japanese Hop—which is invasive, Stinging Nettle, and Smallspike False Nettle.



Known disguises: With wings folded, the adult butterfly resembles a dead leaf. Patterning in shades of brown, ranging from mottled or striated to almost unmarked, camouflages Question Marks against the tree bark on which they frequently land.

Special Weaponry: Question Mark caterpillars are boldly colored and highly visible. Early instars are black, while later instars develop dramatic and variable color combinations. The black bodies of late instars are covered with patterns of white or pale-yellow to rusty lines and dots. At all stages, Question Mark caterpillars are covered with branched spines, each of which ends with a sharp, black tip, making the caterpillar highly unpalatable—although not venomous. The color of the spines in later instars is variable and ranges from yellow to orange, red, and black.

Winter hide-out: Winter finds some Question Marks remaining in northern areas as inactive adult butterflies that shelter in woodpiles or under loose tree bark. Other Question Marks migrate south in the fall, with a return migration in the spring

Opposite page: Question Mark caterpillar on Northern Hackberry.

Below: Question Mark chrysalis.

Right: Adult butterfly in the fall.



If capture is avoided:

Question Marks lay eggs in the spring to produce a summer brood of flying adults. These lay eggs in the fall for a fall/spring brood which overwinters or migrates. Their wing color varies seasonally, with the “summer form” displaying an almost entirely black hindwing with short tails. “Fall/spring form” Question Marks have bright orange hindwings, longer tails, and a beautiful violet-gray wing edge. Look for Question Marks over the eastern 2/3rd of the United States near deciduous woods that include some open space.



Jane Hurwitz is editor of *Butterfly Gardener* magazine and author of *Butterfly Gardening: The North American Butterfly Association Guide*.