

# BUTTERFLY GARDENING

## ATTRACTING BUTTERFLIES TO YOUR GARDEN

Whether you choose to attract a butterfly that is wide-ranging or one that is common only in your particular area, the principles that apply are the same: Provide the butterfly with what it needs to survive and it will adapt to your garden as it would to other natural and disturbed habitats.

### **BASKING:**

Because butterflies are cold-blooded, they need to bask in the sun to absorb enough warmth for flight and other activities. Their wings act like solar panels as they gather warmth and energy from the rays of the sun.

### **ROOSTING:**

Butterflies need a place to roost for the night, and they often choose the underside of a leaf or a well-camouflaged portion of a bush. Butterflies also roost during cold, cloudy or rainy weather. In general, they spend about fourteen hours each day roosting, from late afternoon or sunset until midmorning the following day.

### **HIBERNATION AND MIGRATION:**

Some butterflies spend the winter as adults hibernating in the crevices of tree trunks and walls. The Monarch is the only truly migratory butterfly we have in Parker County.

### **DESIGNING A BUTTERFLY GARDEN:**

A successful butterfly garden is one that contains all the components that butterflies need for food, shelter, and breeding. Butterflies need sunlight to keep their bodies working effectively; a food source and water to give them energy and nutrients for their activities; and hospitable surroundings that offer cover from the elements, a place to spend the night, and, in general, approximate the environment of their natural world.

### **NECTAR FLOWERS:**

Flower nectar is a primary food source for most butterflies. Butterflies take nectar from a wide variety of annuals, perennials, shrubs, trees, vines and herbs. In general, the more of a nectar flower that is in bloom, the more likely butterflies will be to select it for its nectar. To make the most of the butterfly-attracting capabilities of nectar flowers it is best to plant them in patches rather than as isolated plants. Massed nectar flowers provide a large area of color or a strong scent that will attract the butterflies. Also, the larger the number



of nectar-brimming blossoms, the longer the butterflies will stay in your garden. The many nectar flower shapes and colors provide a variety of choices for creative butterfly garden designs.

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### **FLOWER SHAPES:**

Nectar flowers exist in many forms and shapes, some uniquely suited to the feeding needs of the butterfly. Composites have a wide platform on which butterflies perch while they take nectar from the many individual small flowers. Composites include daisies (*Bellis*), marigolds (*Tagetes*), and shepherd's needle (*Bidens pilosa*). Other nectar flowers, butterfly bush (*Buddleia davidii*) for example, are composed of closely packed clusters of flowers arranged in spikes or, like the butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), in broad umbels (an umbrella like flower cluster in which all the flower stalks emerge from one central point). Some, such as honeysuckle (*Lonicera*), are borne on vines, and spread evenly across the surface of the plant. Still others, such as daylilies (*Hemerocallis*), are large single flowers to which butterflies cling while they feed.

### **FLOWERS FOR SHELTER:**

Because butterflies thrive better in a sheltered garden than in one exposed to wind, plant tall shrubs, vines or trees around the perimeter of the garden to provide a windbreak. If possible select plants that provide nectar as well as shelter for the butterflies.

### **FLOWER FRAGRANCES:**

Butterflies are often much more attracted to sweetly scented flowers than they are to other flowers in the garden.

### **FLOWER COLORS:**

Among the most complex in the insect world, the eyes of a butterfly enable it to see in every direction except directly beneath its body. Butterflies also possess the broadest spectrum of color vision in the animal kingdom. Unlike some insects, butterflies can see in the full color spectrum. Yet, some butterflies fly readily to flowers of one color while passing by an entire bed of flowers of another color. Species have their favorite colors. In general, butterflies find little appeal in flowers of greenish-blue hues. Many butterflies prefer orange flowers, and others fly most often to red flowers, but by far the most favored flower colors lie in the purple, white, yellow and pink ranges, with true blue next.

### **FLOWER SEASONS:**

Another factor to consider in planting a butterfly garden is the timing and length of each plant's flowering season. Because butterflies require nectar during the entire season they are present in the garden, choose a selection of plants that blossom at different times to provide a continuous supply of nectar. In this way, you will keep the butterflies well fed and ensure they remain longer in your garden. We are located in an area that has butterflies year round so we need to provide flowers for every season.

### **SHELTER:**

Butterflies require shelter from the wind, rain and other elements, as well as a place to roost at night. Providing shelter for butterflies will go a long way toward keeping them in the garden. Shrub foliage is not only useful as a windbreak; it also offers butterflies a protected spot to roost for the night. Exposed bare branches are a perfect place from which to foray out on courtship flights.

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Some butterflies will also perch and roost in overgrown areas and patches of tall grass. In one part of the garden, let the grass grow tall and the flowers grow naturally without trimming or plant some of the wonderful ornamental grasses that are now available. An overgrown area will resemble the butterfly's natural habitat and provide more protection from the elements than a single flower border next to a lawn or bare area.

*(NOTE: I do not trim my ornamental grasses until I see new growth in the spring because the grasses provide the perfect hiding place for my butterflies. I also think the grasses are beautiful with their manila colors and their fluorescents blowing and rustling in the winter winds.)*

### **BUTTERFLY LOG PILE:**

Another way to provide a place for butterflies to perch, roost or even hibernate is to build an open structure of logs. This can be simply four or five logs in a pile or if you have wood for your fireplace or outdoor fireplace, they will find this and appreciate it.

### **SUNSHINE:**

Warm sunshine is an essential ingredient of any butterfly garden; without it, the butterflies cannot fly and forage for nectar. Ideally, a butterfly garden should have a southern exposure so that it receives the maximum sunlight throughout the day. Provide ample open space in the garden, preferably in the center, so that the butterflies have adequate room to fly about and catch the rays of the sun.



Nectar flowers need to be in areas of near-continuous sun. Butterflies are more likely to fly to flowers placed in the sun than to those placed in the shade. Most nectar flowers thrive in full sun; so setting them out in the sunniest areas of the garden will be best for the butterflies and for the plants. In addition, females often lay their eggs on host plants that are placed in the sun.

### **MUD-PUDDLING:**

Swallowtails, sulfurs, blues, skippers and other butterflies obtain moisture and essential nutrients and minerals from the moist areas around water. This practice is commonly known as mud puddling. Damp areas or shallow puddles are needed to form in the garden for the butterflies. In a designated area for butterflies, add salt to the water from time to time to provide mud-puddling butterflies with the sodium they need.

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Mud-puddling usually occurs during the warmest hours of the day, generally between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. The butterflies, rather than landing directly on the puddle, will gather on the moist dirt or sand on the side of the puddle to obtain moisture without putting themselves in any danger.

### **BASKING:**

Include a flat, rocky area in your garden, where butterflies can bask in the sun while absorbing the warmth of the rocks. A south-facing gradual slope is ideal for a basking spot. Imbed several flat rocks in the soil and watch for butterflies as they come to bask. Plant ground cover nectar flowers, such as sweet alyssum (*Lobularia maritima*) among the rocks. Butterflies will also use brick or cement patios, wooden decks or even gravel or dirt paths for basking. Place nectar flowers such as phlox (*Phlox*) in these areas.

### **LARVAE (CATERPILLAR) HOST PLANTS**

Once you have attracted adult butterflies to your garden with the right conditions, encourage them to stay from generation to generation by providing the proper host plants for the butterfly larvae. Some good plants for larvae feeding are fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*), dill (*Anethum graveolens*), parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*), passion vine (*Passiflora x alatocacrulea*), milkweed (*Asclepias spp.*) The typical garden may not have plants that host the larvae of most butterflies. The caterpillars of each species usually favor the foliage of specific plants or plant groups at this stage of their lives. Larval host plants are often unattractive, weedy and wild, generally unpopular in cultivated gardens. Yet, adult female butterflies choose these particular plants (Monarchs must have milkweed) to lay their eggs on. This assures that newly hatched caterpillars have appropriate food immediately at hand, or the noxious compounds from plants that repel predators. Typically, young caterpillars begin voracious feeding immediately after hatching, virtually skeletonizing host plant foliage. Watch a parsley worm (Swallowtail) devour the foliage of Queen Anne's lace, carrots, or parsley. Butterfly larvae grow as they eat, shedding their skins four to six times before achieving maximum size for pupating. Then they become immobile in a hard chrysalis suspended from a leaf or stem of the larval host plant until emerging as an adult butterfly.

### **CATERPILLARS: DISTINGUISHING FRIEND FROM FOE**

Butterfly larvae tend to be solitary, or sparsely distributed, whereas pest caterpillars such as fall webworms make tents and hatch in the hundreds. Webworms are best handled (if possible) by pruning the tent out of the tree or breaking it open so that the birds can eat the immature larvae. However, even in sparse numbers butterfly caterpillars can damage ornamentals or food plants. For example, the ubiquitous white cabbage butterfly lays eggs that turn into destructive green worms that devour cabbage and broccoli and their relatives. An insecticide product containing Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*) sprayed onto plant foliage will handle feeding worms that threaten to destroy crop yields. In the case of parsley worms on parsley, simply moving them to a non-essential plant such as wild carrot will both save the crop and preserve the eventual butterfly.

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### **PROVIDING OTHER FOOD SOURCES:**

Instead of flower nectar, some butterflies feed primarily on rotting fruit, tree sap, etc. getting moisture and nutrients from all these substances. For these butterflies, set out a plate of rotting bananas, plums, pears or other fruit in which you have added stale beer, sugar or molasses and yeast. Allow the mixture to ferment. The mixture gives off a strong odor that will attract butterflies. You can even “paint” it on the trunks of trees to stimulate tree sap. After you have enjoyed a watermelon, cantaloupe or other melon set the rind out in a location away from the house and let the butterflies enjoy themselves.

### **BUTTERFLY FEEDERS:**

*(NOTE: I have never found this necessary but if you are not seeing butterflies in your garden, you may want to try one.)*

Alternative food source for butterflies is homemade feeders filled with a solution of sugar water. Mix four parts water with one part granulated sugar, boil the solution until the sugar is dissolved and let the solution cool. Fill a dish or flat container with an absorbent material such as tissue paper or plastic scouring pad (must contain no cleaning solutions) saturate the material with the sugar solution. To stop harmful mold from forming, replace the sugar water and wash the dish thoroughly on a regular basis (once or twice a week). Place the feeder near nectar flowers and protect the feeders from ants and other invaders.

To help encourage a variety of butterflies to your garden, you need to know what each stage of their existence looks like. (OVA LARVA PUPA ADULT) this link will provide the information you need. <http://www.dallasbutterflies.com/Hotspots/html/discovery.html>