

Pollinators Need Our Help

While the best-known pollinators may be honeybees and bumblebees, there are other insects that contribute to pollination. Some of the most beautiful and graceful are butterflies, and instead of noisily buzzing from flower to flower, butterflies artfully flit. Though butterflies may not be as efficient as bees in pollinating plants and crops, butterflies certainly do their fair share in bringing about seed and fruit production—and definitely are pleasing to watch.



Butterflies pollinate a wide variety of flowers that open during the day. They frequent big, beautiful, brightly colored blooms. Butterflies have good color vision sensing more “wavelengths” than either humans or bees and, unlike bees; butterflies can see the color red.

Scent is another characteristic. One study speculated that it might be “some kind of scent or marking” that attracts a butterfly. Another study found that many butterflies produce pheromones to entice the opposite sex, and this scent is similar to flowers that they are drawn to.

As butterflies are perching feeders, they favor flowers with a landing platform (labellum). They gather pollen as they walk around flower clusters on their long and thin legs.

Finding the right flower is only the beginning of a pollinator's challenge. Though butterflies may not be premiere pollinators, their continual flitting from flower to flower more than makes up for the quantity of pollen they carry. Butterflies are found on every continent but Antarctica; the U. S. is home to about 700 different species.

The butterfly has a 4-stage life cycle—egg, caterpillar (larvae), pupa and adult. After mating, females typically deposit their eggs on the undersides of leaves, especially those that act as a food source for newly emerging caterpillars.

Adult butterflies feed on the nectar of flowers, they lay their eggs on a limited number of native plants. This is because butterfly caterpillars are host specific. Plant-wise, the caterpillars of some butterfly species like asters, black-eyed Susan, clover, lupines, milkweed, sedum or violets. Hackberry, oak or willow trees make caterpillars of other butterfly species equally happy. Oddly enough, butterflies taste with their feet, which is where their taste sensors are located and by standing on their food, they can taste it to see if their caterpillars are able to eat it.

Butterflies have smooth, slender bodies, knobbed antennae, rest with their wings held upright, and fly during warm weather. Their bright coloring is the result of loose, powdery scales on the wings. Probably the best known of the species in the U. S. is the orange and black patterned monarch butterfly; however, butterflies come in a wide range of colors and patterns to delight the eye of the beholder.

Butterflies probe blossoms with their long tongues. Each flower has nectar usually hidden in narrow tubes or spurs that is suitable in length. This tongue or proboscis works like a straw, drawing up nectar and when not in use, the proboscis stays coiled.

Butterfly populations are on the decline due to humans reducing numbers of pollinators by destroying habitats and migratory nectar corridors, emitting pollution and the misuse of pesticides.

How can you help? Attract butterflies to your garden, by planting a "butterfly friendly" garden which provides the types of plants required by butterfly larvae. Butterfly friendly plants usually produce clusters of brightly colored sweet-smelling flowers and include asters, daisies, butterfly bush, butterfly weed, lantana, marigolds, purple coneflowers and zinnias. Understand that releasing non-native butterflies for special events, such as weddings, can be harmful to native butterfly populations. It's worthwhile to become better educated in the effort to keep these extraordinary creatures among us.



Beneficials in the Garden & Landscape is an [EarthKind™ program](#) coordinated through Extension Horticulture at Texas A&M University. EarthKind uses research-proven techniques to provide maximum gardening and landscape enjoyment while preserving and protecting our environment.