

Gardening for Butterflies

Butterfly populations are decreasing due to habitat loss, increased pesticide use, and pollution. Gardeners can help by including plants in their landscape to serve as habitat for caterpillars and adult butterflies. Butterflies not only play an important part in our ecosystem, but they are also beautiful and fascinating to watch. Many annuals attract butterflies so start planning your butterfly garden now.

You need to provide both host plants and nectar plants for the complete life cycle of butterflies. The life of a butterfly starts with the deposit of a fertilized egg on a host plant. The host plant will provide nutrition for the caterpillar that emerges from the egg in the larval stage of the butterfly's life. The caterpillar then molts into an adult butterfly during the chrysalis stage. Now the adult butterfly looks for nectar plants to feed on, and the whole cycle starts again.



Exhibit of Molting Butterflies



Butterfly Love

Butterflies use sight and smell to find a mate. The absorption of light in male butterfly wings is different from that of females. We may not be able to tell the difference but they can. Each species of butterfly also has a slightly different pheromone that is used to find a suitable mate.

Absorption of Light

Opaque or imperfectly transparent objects absorb some colors while other colors are transmitted or reflected. This phenomenon causes a thick piece of glass to appear bluish-green. Some colors transmitted or reflected by butterfly wings may be invisible to the human eye.

Pheromone

A chemical substance used to influence the behavior of other members of the same species.

Here are the basic necessities for a successful butterfly garden.

Sun. Butterflies fly best in full sun and their favorite nectar plants require at least 6 hours of sun per day.

Wind Buffer. Butterflies are delicate so place your butterfly garden near a building, wall, or taller plants to protect them from strong winds.

Nectar Plants. Butterflies are attracted to flowers that have a particular shape, color or fragrance. Flat-topped and single-flowered varieties offer a perch and easy access to nectar. Group flowers by color to lure passing

butterflies. They are especially attracted to purple, bright pink, yellow, orange and red. The fragrance that attracts butterflies is not necessarily something we can smell. For instance, roses do not contain nectar and thus do not attract butterflies. However, single-flowered zinnias that we cannot smell are loaded with nectar and are a butterfly favorite. When planning your nectar garden, think about varying heights and bloom time.



Butterflies also like fruit

Host Plants. These are the caterpillar food plants. Many butterflies utilize native trees and shrubs as host plants so these may already be in your surrounding landscape. If you plant specific host plants with the intent of attracting more butterflies to "stick close to home" be prepared to tolerate some chewing damage on the host plants.

No Pesticides. Pesticides can kill both caterpillars and butterflies so use alternate pest management practices to control plant pests.



Listed below are just a few ideas for nectar and host plants to get you started. Learn about the butterflies in your local area and plant what they prefer.

- *Asclepias tuberosa* (Butterfly Weed)
- *Aster* species
- *Eupatorium* species (Joe Pye Weed)
- *Echinacea purpurea* (Purple Coneflower)
- *Gomphrena globosa* (Globe Amaranth)
- *Helianthus* species (Sunflower)
- *Lantana camara*
- *Liatris* species (Blazing Star)

- *Mentha* species (Mint)
- *Tagetes patula* (Marigold)
- *Tithonia* species (Mexican Sunflower)



- **Host Plants** (Caterpillar Food Plants) – and the butterflies that use them
- *Anaphalis margaritacea* (Pearly Everlasting) – Painted Lady
- *Anethum graveolens* (Dill) – Swallowtail
- *Antirrhinum majus* (Snapdragon) – Painted Lady
- *Asclepias* species (Common Milkweed) – Monarch
- *Cornus kousa* (Dogwood) – Spring Azure
- *Humulus lupulus* (Common Hops) – Red Admiral
- *Petroselinum crispum* (Parsley) – Swallowtail
- *Salix* species (Willow) – Mourning Cloak
- *Viola* species (Violets, Pansies) – Great Spangled Fritillary



Admirers of all ages like butterflies

Resources

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Photos by Karen Palmer at Brookside Gardens in Montgomery County, MD.

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