

Attracting Hummingbirds and Butterflies

By Jason Miller

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Make your garden a kaleidoscope of color by attracting hummingbirds and butterflies.

Hummingbirds and butterflies are living ornaments in the garden. Whether they're zipping between feeder and tree or calmly lapping up nectar from a catchfly blossom, they lend color and magic to every Pacific Northwest backyard.

Let's start with **hummingbirds**. In Skagit County, we're most likely to see the Rufous Hummingbird or Anna's Hummingbird, usually beginning in March or April. The latter often over winters in milder areas of western Washington.

A hummingbird's diet consists of nectar from flowers and protein from insects. They eat small spiders, aphids and other small insects. You can encourage hummingbirds to visit your garden by offering a source of nectar. Early-blooming shrubs that attract them are beauty bush (*Kolkwitzia amabilis*), red elderberry (*Sambucus callicarpa*) and flowering currant (*Ribes* of various species). Shrubs to draw them later in the season are hardy fuchsia (*Fuchsia* sp.), butterfly bush (*Buddleia davidii*), and Weigela (*Weigela florida*). Vines like trumpet creeper (*Campsis radicans*), honeysuckle (*Lonicera*) or annual scarlet runner beans (*Phaseolus coccineus*) also lure and feed them. Last, don't be too quick to level that blackberry thicket; hummingbirds love the vines for their protective thorns and nectar-rich flowers in spring.

Hummingbirds are most attracted to brilliant orange or red tube-shaped flowers. *Phygelius* (cape fuchsia), nearly a shrub in some area gardens, looks like it was designed for their pleasure. Other perennials to use are columbine (*Aquilegia*), bleeding heart (*Dicentra*) and delphinium. In June and July, hummingbirds also will indulge in foxglove (*Digitalis*), coral bells (*Heuchera*) and hollyhocks.

Feeders also give gardeners a chance to enjoy these birds. Be sure to place your feeders in places less accessible to hummingbirds' natural enemies—crows, jays and cats. Fill clean feeders with a solution of sugar and water, using one part sugar to four parts water. In early spring, a sweeter solution (one part sugar to three parts water) is fine.



Hummingbirds will readily come to feeders, especially during spring, when nectar-filled flowers are more scarce.

Photo by Jason Miller

The Washington State Department of Wildlife asserts that “any solutions with dye, food coloring or flavoring in them are considered unsafe and aren’t needed,” especially if your feeder has a decorated or frilled red edge on it. Clean and refill your feeders often (every four to five days in spring; every two to three days in summer) to prevent mold from growing on the sugary solution and harming the little guys.

Finally, try encouraging the small insects hummingbirds love to eat and refrain from using broad-spectrum insecticides, whenever possible.

As for **butterflies**, keep your eyes peeled for tiger swallowtails, painted ladies, and red admirals in your Skagit County garden. To attract these and other butterflies, begin by catering to their needs throughout their life cycle. Doing so will help to encourage them to spend their entire lives on your property.



A tiger swallowtail butterfly samples a catchfly blossom.
To attract swallowtails to your garden, plant Pawpaws for their larvae and catchfly or coneflowers for the adults.
Photo by Jason Miller

Start by planting nectar sources that will draw in adults to feed. Use large groups of a variety of different butterfly-friendly plants. Try daisies, black-eyed susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*), coneflowers (*Echinacea spp.*), goldenrods (*Solidago spp.*), milkweed (*Asclepias spp.*) and sunflowers (*Helianthus*). Other favorites are blanketflower, cosmos and zinnias. Most of the nectar-bearing plants prefer full sun, which works nicely, because butterflies are cold-blooded and rely on the sun for body heat.

Include “host plants”; i.e., plants on which butterflies prefer to lay their eggs so their larvae can feed. For example, those tiger swallowtails like Pawpaw; the painted ladies will seek out thistles. And remember, if you want butterflies, you must have caterpillars. Any plant damage they cause will likely grow back.

Next, provide shelter in the form of tree groves, shrubs, hedges or wood piles, which will protect these fragile creatures during bad weather. Oh, and those butterfly houses? They’re cute, sure, but butterflies seldom use them.

Last, give “your” butterflies a water source by creating puddles in your garden paths. They like to sip from the muddy edges of puddles, where they can get mineral salts as well as slake their thirst.

Laying out a welcome mat of plentiful food sources, plus shelter and areas to lay eggs and raise their young, practically guarantees regular visits from hummingbirds and butterflies. All you have to do is sit back and watch the colors fly in.