

How to Create a Butterfly Garden

By Sonja Morris

Creating your own butterfly garden is really quite easy, but like everything, there are a few simple rules to follow. You need to grow both nectar and larva plants. Then the butterflies will come. We are very fortunate in our area, because not only can we grow a large spectrum of plant material, we have well over a hundred species of butterflies that frequent our area. A garden rich in flora and fauna offers the gardener the opportunity to observe a complex biological world right in your very own yard. Many helpful invertebrates are also attracted to the same plant material as the butterflies – so attracting armies of diverse, and sometimes bizarre, insects to your garden will be easy with plants like dill, fennel, cumin, and various elderberries and cherries.

Since conservation is a high priority for me as a gardener, I am writing this article to encourage others to create plant and insect habitats without disrupting the delicate ecological relationship between the two.

Traits of a Good Butterfly Plant

Nectar Plants

For nectar plants, flower shape is particularly important because butterflies can only hover for a short period of time, and need to land on the flower. They prefer composites (daisy-like flowers), panicles (large clusters of blooms on a stem), and umbels (flat-topped flowers that originate from a single apex). Some plants that provide a landing pad for the butterflies as well as easy access to the nectar are:

- *Achillea filipendulina* (fernleaf yarrow)
- *Asclepias tuberosa* (butterfly weed)
- Aster species (sunflower or composite)
- *Buddleia davidii* (butterfly bush) – Listed in last month's article The Obnoxious Weeds – Ornamental Plants with Bad Manners
- Helianthus species (sunflowers)

The best way to select the right plants for your garden is to get a list of the butterflies that frequent your area and then plant their favorite nectar and larva plants. The butterflies usually prefer species, rather than hybrids. This can sometimes create a problem for the designer who more often than not selects plant material that is not self-sowing or invasive.

The Lepidoptera (butterflies and moths) are incredibly beautiful and delicate at the same time. To attract and accommodate them, ALL herbicides, pesticides and genetically altered plants must be avoided. Large groupings of the right material in the right place will draw them in for a sip of nectar. However, lots of alternative liquids can be used for food as well. Urine, tree sap, even decaying fruits, and animals are visited by the butterflies to obtain the essential minerals that they need.

Butterflies, unlike moths, have a functional proboscis (tongue-like appendage), which they use to draw up the nectar from the flowers. Moths live off their fat reserves obtained during their larva stage.

This butterfly-to-plant relationship is an extremely important one that not only feeds and nurtures the butterflies, but passively helps with the pollination process of the plants.

Host Plants

Host plants provide fuel for butterflies during the transition from larva to adult. Host plants are where adult butterflies lay their eggs, so selecting the right hosts and providing a large enough quantity of them is critical. Caterpillars will perish if there is not enough food available. This food needs to be free of all types of pesticides. The following plants are some of the most common host plants:

- *Alcea rosea* (hollyhock)
- *Anethum graveolens* (dill)
- *Trifolium pratense* (red clover)
- *Petroselinum crispum* (parsley)
- *Asclepias syriaca* (common milkweed)
- *Veronica novenboracensis* (New York ironweed)

The use of beneficial insects is the most effective way to control pest problems in a habitat garden for butterflies. If you create a healthy environment for the plants, you will not have a problem with pests.

Creating the Ideal Butterfly Habitat

The butterfly garden site should include plenty of sunshine, preferably full sun and shelter from the wind. Water in the form of seepage or a water hole with flat light colored rocks around it for them to land on is also necessary. Another requirement is protection from predators. The nectar and host plants should be planted in large masses of the same species. A mixed planting of annuals, perennials, trees, and woody shrubs will provide food and shelter for all stages of the butterfly life cycle.

After researching butterflies and their life cycles, I designed a habitat that catered to their specific needs as a teaching tool for two Portland public schools. I am happy to report there have been several butterfly sightings, even though the plant material have just begun to bloom.

For additional information consult the following web sites.

- Traits of a Good Butterfly Plant at the Smithsonian Institution's site.
- [Feeding Behavior](#) at the Butterflies and Moths site.
- Butterfly / Plant Relationship at the Smithsonian Institution's site.
- [Butterflies and Moths of North America](#).

The Xerces Society located at 4828 Southeast Hawthorne Boulevard, Portland, Oregon 97215 offers a vast amount of information. They are a non-profit organization "dedicated to invertebrates – the little things that run the world – and to the preservation of critical biosystems worldwide."

Sources used to write this article are the web sites mentioned above and the personal hands-on experience of designing and helping with the installation of two public butterfly gardens that were completed in June 2001.

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