

ATTRACTING BUTTERFLIES TO YOUR GARDEN

Introduction

Butterflies are always a welcome sight in the garden and serve to remind us that we must be doing something right. Even the smallest city balcony can be a magnet for butterflies. For the larger property owner, the possibilities are endless. Since they have both keen senses of sight and smell, the plants they like are mostly the colorful, fragrant ones we enjoy. If you keep a few simple rules in mind, you can easily make your landscape more butterfly friendly.

Life History of the Butterfly

Good butterfly management is largely based on understanding the life cycle of the butterfly. Like all insects, they begin their lives as eggs and undergo metamorphosis, literally a “change in form.” The egg hatches into a caterpillar or larva whose main goal in life is to eat. The mother butterfly lays her eggs on the particular plant or group of plants that the larvae are most adapted to eat. Most species of butterflies feed on a very narrow range of plants in the larval stage, and some are adapted to feed on plants that are toxic to most insects. We’re all familiar with the story of the monarch larvae who possess the ability to store the poisonous compounds in milkweed foliage and, thereby, make themselves unpalatable to predators.

They next pass through an immobile phase called the pupal stage. They emerge from their pupal case, called a chrysalis, as adults. As we’ve seen, the adult is the reproductive stage of the insect and, because adults have wings, they serve as the primary vehicle for dispersal. Most butterfly adults feed on flower nectar by uncoiling a long tube called a proboscis. They search out their favorite flowers with good color vision, a sense of smell that operates through their antennae, and a sense of taste that operates through structures on their feet. They prefer flowers they can land on, like those with large petals (asters and their relatives), large clusters of tiny flowers (Joe-Pye weed, milkweed) or lips, like mints. They avoid drooping flowers, those with no nectar, or those with enclosed blooms they can’t reach, like peas. It is important to realize that the adults are usually nectar feeders; larvae are normally leaf feeders.

Keys to a Successful Butterfly Garden

- Most butterflies (and their food plants) enjoy full sun.

- They seek protection from strong winds. A background planting of shrubs can shelter them. Choose shrubs that offer nectar to adults or whose leaves are eaten by larvae.
- Most adults need to drink, and obtain minerals and salts from damp spots on the ground. You can create one in an out-of-the-way spot by burying a garbage can lid with a hole in the bottom filled with mud and topped with sand and pebbles. If you’re constructing a pond, create a “butterfly beach” by running the liner under a layer of sand on the edge of the pond.
- They enjoy basking in the sun to warm themselves during chilly weather. Rock work on the edge of a pond or in a rock garden serves them well.
- Often nectar is in short supply in early spring and again in fall. Be sure to include plants that bloom at these times. Plants grown in containers can supplement your garden flowers.
- Some adult butterflies, including the red admiral, viceroy, and mourning cloak, will also feed on tree sap and rotting fruit. To construct a simple feeder, fill an 8” flowerpot saucer with a mixture of sand and gravel. Place a brightly colored scouring pad in the middle. Fill it with a mixture of pureed overripe bananas and beer, honey, molasses, and/or maple syrup so that the only surface of the pad and the tips of the largest bits of gravel stay dry. Hang it in the shade or set it inside a larger saucer of water on the ground to discourage ants and other crawling insects.
- The caterpillars of some butterflies and skippers feed on grasses, making a meadow of native grasses and nectar plants doubly attractive.
- Butterfly watching is part of the fun. Field guides are readily available. Close-focusing binoculars bring them into sharper view.
- Avoid pesticides. The large black-striped green ‘worms’ eating your parsley are the larvae of the Eastern Black Swallowtail.

Good Native Nectar Plants

Spring

Common Name	Scientific Name	Height/Color	Comments
Pussytoes	<i>Antennaria sp.</i>	6"/white	Full sun
Wild Strawberry	<i>Fragaria virginiana</i>	6"/white	Nice fruit
Wild Geranium	<i>Geranium maculatum</i>	12-16"/pink	Likes some shade
Creeping Phlox	<i>Phlox stolonifera</i>	6"/pink	Likes some shade
Stonecrop	<i>Sedum ternatum</i>	6"/white	Likes some shade

Summer

Common Name	Scientific Name	Height/Color	Comments
Nodding Onion	<i>Allium cernuum</i>	1'/pink	Rocky, dry
Tall Coreopsis	<i>Coreopsis tripteris</i>	6'/yellow	Birds like seeds
Tall Sunflower	<i>Helianthus giganteus</i>	6-8'/yellow	Birds like seeds
Blazing Star	<i>Liatris spicata</i>	3-4'/purple	Spiky flowers
Cardinal Flower	<i>Lobelia cardinalis</i>	3'/scarlet	Also attracts hummingbirds
Bee Balm	<i>Monarda didyma</i>	4'/scarlet	Also attracts hummingbirds
Thin-leaved Coneflower	<i>Rudbeckia triloba</i>	3'/yellow	Birds like seeds
Whorled Rosinweed	<i>Silphium trifoliolate</i>	6'/yellow	Birds like seeds

Fall

Common Name	Scientific Name	Height/Color	Comments
Aster	<i>Aster sp.</i>	4-8'/white-purple	Many species
Joe-Pye Weed	<i>Eutrochium sp.</i>	6'/mauve	Large flower clusters
Helen's Flower	<i>Helenium autumnale</i>	4'/yellow	Likes moisture
Ironweed	<i>Vernonia sp.</i>	6'/purple	Easy care

Some Important Larval Plants

Common Name	Scientific Name	Height/Color	Comments
Pink Milkweed	<i>Asclepias incarnata</i>	3-4'/pink	Host to Monarch
Butterfly Milkweed	<i>Asclepias tuberosa</i>	3'/orange	Host to Monarch
Turtlehead	<i>Chelone glabra</i>	4'/white	Host to Baltimore
Golden Alexanders	<i>Zizia aurea</i>	1-2'/yellow	Host to E. Black Swallowtail

Shrubs for Butterflies

Common Name	Scientific Name	Height/Color	Comments
Spice Bush	<i>Lindera benzoin</i>	6-12'/yellow	Larval host for spice bush swallowtail
Viburnum	<i>Viburnum sp.</i>	5-14'/white	Fruit also good for birds

Audubon Suggested Reading List – Available for purchase at the Audubon Nature Store

Bringing Nature Home by Douglas W. Tallamy
Milkweeds, Monarchs and More by Rea, Oberhauser and Quinn
The Wild Garden by Robinson & Darke
National Audubon Society Field Guide to Wildflowers
Newcomb's Wildflower Guide by Lawrence Newcomb
Wildflowers of Pennsylvania by Mary Joy Haywood

Understanding Perennials: A New Look at an Old Favorite
 by William Cullina
Attracting Native Pollinators by the Xerces Society
Butterflies Through Binoculars: The East by Jeffrey Glassberg
Beginner's Guide to Butterflies by Donald and Lillian Stokes