

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