



Butterflies in Your Garden

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Many desire butterfly gardens to attract these beautiful insects. It's hard to even think of them as insects, a term bringing to mind some of the undesirable garden insects we despise. Yet butterflies are more than attractive. Searching for nectar they help pollinate plants, ensuring seeds for future generations. They are part of the food chain, serving as prey for many birds and small mammals.

Whether your garden is in the city or country, large or small, Bulletin 7151 from the University of Maine includes some design tips towards developing a butterfly-friendly landscape. Landscapes can be attractive both to butterflies, and visually to us. Most are aware of some of the design ideas for aesthetic landscapes. But what are some of the habitat considerations you'll need to attract butterflies?

Most are familiar with the life cycle of butterflies, having as a child collected a caterpillar and watched it change into a butterfly. These stages are egg, larva or caterpillar, chrysalis or pupa which is the stage the metamorphose, and the adult or the butterfly.

Food for the caterpillars, which are also the host plants where the adults lay their eggs, will vary. Many butterflies have a range of host plants, others more specific preferences. Monarch caterpillars only eat milkweeds. Black swallowtail larvae eat leaves of dill, parsley, carrot, and fennel. Painted lady caterpillars eat thistle leaves.

Food for the butterflies is primarily flower nectar. Make sure you have a full succession of blooms providing such nectar through the season, or the butterflies will look elsewhere.

Water for butterflies should be provided in the form of a puddle in a sunny area, preferably near the butterfly garden. Containers could be a small trench in the soil lined with plastic, a plastic pail buried in the ground, or a dish or platter. Fill the container with sand. Place a few rocks and twigs on the sand to provide landing sites within reach of the water. Then fill the container with water to the level of the sand. Such puddles are those sought by butterflies, not birdbaths, ponds, or large water features.

Overwintering butterflies need cover. This may already be present in the habitat or nearby. Since species may overwinter in any of the four stages, a variety of cover is needed.

Butterflies overwintering in the adult stage may use the peeling bark on trees, perennial plants, and old logs or fences. Old sheds, barns, or houses also provide overwintering sites. Similar sites are used by overwintering pupae. Butterfly hibernation boxes are seldom used by them, but more frequently by wasp colonies.

Butterflies overwintering as caterpillars or eggs use herbaceous perennials, shrubs, and trees. Leave the leaf litter and dead plant parts of perennials in the garden until spring to provide cover for them from predators such as birds. Of course keep your bird feeders and bird baths away from the butterfly garden!

Provide gardens in full sun areas. Butterflies warm up to fly and be active. The air temperature must be at least 40 to 60 degrees Fahrenheit. Place perches for sunning in, or near, the garden where butterflies can land and spread their wings. These include flat stones, wooden fence posts, and areas of mulch.

Plant nectar sources in sites protected from wind. This helps butterflies fly and forage in the garden with less effort. You could plant windbreaks of trees and shrubs that would provide cover and perhaps even food. Houses, garages, wood fences, and stone walls also serve as windbreaks.

Finally, use non-chemical methods of pest management in your gardens and yard. At some stage of their life cycle, all butterflies are susceptible to chemicals, even some of the least toxic ones such as Bt products. Some of the feeding damage on leaves is probably caused by caterpillars, which you need to tolerate in order to later have butterflies! Usually such feeding is minor, and doesn't pose a significant nor long term threat to your plants.

To summarize, follow these dozen practical tips to create attractive habitats for butterflies, and you'll no doubt benefit and attract other wildlife such as moths, bees, hummingbirds, and birds.

- 1) Choose a garden site that is in full sun, and is protected from high winds for obvious reasons. It should be visible from windows, decks, or places where you can observe the butterflies.
- 2) If you need to provide wind protection for these fragile and lightweight creatures, plant a windbreak of trees or shrubs. Such woody plants will provide cover, and with the right choices food as well. Make sure you provide some for both spring and summer feeding, both by larvae and butterflies.
- 3) Make sure to have some spring-flowering shrubs such as lilac, viburnum, blueberry, and amelanchier. These provide cover, as well as nectar early in the season. Ripe fruits of these and others such as shadbush, crabapple, and raspberry also attract some butterflies later in the season.
- 4) Include some summer-flowering shrubs such as privet and summersweet for nectar later in the season.
- 5) Use annual flowers to provide nectar all summer, perennial flowers to provide nectar during certain periods when they are in bloom. Do some research to see what plants are particularly attractive to what species, and the species found in your area.
- 6) When planting, place the taller plants in back, the shorter plants in front, so you can better see them.
- 7) Butterflies are near-sighted, so more attracted to masses of plants and flowers.
- 8) Eliminate insecticides from your butterfly garden. Learn to tolerate some chewing and damage to plants. Some of that is caused by caterpillars-- the butterfly larvae that turn into butterflies!
- 9) Add some vegetables and herbs to encourage butterflies to lay eggs in the garden. Eggs hatch into caterpillars, and caterpillars need to eat. Caterpillar forage plants include parsley and ornamental cabbage, which are excellent edging plants for the flower garden. Clover makes a good "living mulch path". Carrot and dill add fine-textured, attractive foliage to the flower garden.
- 10) Leave some weeds or wildflowers, as many serve as food sources for both caterpillars and butterflies. The orange monarch, loved by so many, needs milkweed on which to lay its eggs and the caterpillars to feed. Thistles and nettles, pulled out from our more formal gardens, serve as food too. Even spring dandelion provides nectar for the Spring Azure butterfly. Edges of gardens, areas out of sight, or fence rows are areas you may allow weeds to grow, if not in a "dedicated" butterfly garden.
- 11) Plant some plants for butterflies in containers for flexibility. Window boxes, hanging baskets, and other containers allow you to attract butterflies to patios, porches, and other visible parts of your landscape.
- 12) Don't deadhead flowers late in the season. In our penchant for tidy and neat gardens, many feel they must cut off the dead flowers from perennials, and even shrubs like rhododendrons and lilacs. Leave these on and the plants will do double duty-- first in the season for the butterflies then later in winter as a source of seeds for the birds.