



Attracting Butterflies to Your Garden

Butterflies are fascinating and fun to watch, adding vibrant color and movement to the summer flower border. It is easy to attract these fluttery beauties to your garden by providing them with their basic needs.



Food, of course, is the first essential. In order to attract the most butterflies, you'll want to incorporate a variety of plants to feed both the caterpillars and the adults. This means you may have to tolerate a little foliar damage on some of the caterpillar host plants, but most plants quickly recover, and the resulting colorful butterflies are well worth this minor inconvenience.

Different species of butterflies require different host plants. Perhaps the most well known butterfly, the Monarch, requires plants in the milkweed family to feed its young. Feeding on milkweed instills the insects with a bitter taste that makes them unattractive to birds, thus increasing their chances of survival. The brilliant, yellow and black-striped tiger swallowtail butterflies feed on the leaves of deciduous trees, while the less common, black and iridescent blue pipevine swallowtails feed on woody vines in the Aristochlia family (Dutchman's Pipe). Other butterflies need herbs or weeds to feed their hungry caterpillars. Native plants are always a good bet, particularly prairie plants.



Nectar sources are not as species specific, and are enjoyed by many types of butterflies. Planting a good variety of plants, with bloom times spread throughout the growing season, is a good strategy for attracting many different kinds of butterflies, and has the added benefit of providing the gardener with season-long color. Plants that are in the daisy family such as asters, chrysanthemums, coneflowers, blanket flowers, and sunflowers are all attractive to the insects. Butterflies like plants that are easy to light on, providing a good perch while they are feeding. If you have an inconspicuous area that you can let go a little more natural, even a little weedy, this will also bring more butterflies to your yard.

In addition to plants in the aforementioned daisy family, there are many other ornamental flowers that will attract butterflies to your garden. To bring in the season's earliest butterflies, grow some candytuft. With its pure white flowers and semi-evergreen foliage, this long-blooming, low growing plant is an excellent choice for edging. Myosotis (alpine forget-me-not) is another compact, early spring blooming plant that butterflies like. Although it is a biennial, and not a true perennial, Myosotis will self-seed if it is allowed to do so, and it will continue to produce plants in subsequent years.

Baptisia is a gorgeous, late spring flowering perennial that has a shrub like appearance at maturity. Its showy flowers are often in the blue-purple color family, but it is also available in yellow shades. The Prairieblues series was developed at the Chicago Botanic Garden, and includes a gorgeous yellow variety that changes to orange as the flower ages.

Phlox is a classic perennial, and a butterfly favorite. Try the creeping type for early bloom, and plant some tall phlox, too, for later color. Besides being very attractive to butterflies, it has the advantage of having an especially long season of bloom. Other long-blooming, butterfly-attracting perennials include yarrow, obedient plant, catmint, Centranthus (Jupiters Beard), daylilies, and Sedum.

For a moist area in the garden, try bee balm, Eupatorium or swamp milkweed.

Goldenrod is a great choice for late season bloom, and its brilliant, arching flowers look striking when planted next to deep blue or purple-flowered Asters. Cimicifuga (snakeroot) is a good choice if you're looking for later bloom in a shady area of the garden.

It is not necessary to limit your flower choices to perennials. Many annuals are excellent butterfly plants. Pentas, lantana, zinnias, snapdragons and osteospermum are a few to try. Butterfly bush, as its name suggests, is a butterfly magnet. Although it sometimes overwinters successfully, it is best to treat it as an annual in the Chicago area, but it is still worth planting for its beautiful, fragrant flower clusters and its ability to attract butterflies in droves.

Besides planting a wide variety of plants, there are other things you can do to make your yard a butterfly haven. Like all living creatures, butterflies need water as well as food. They will congregate at mud puddles and damp areas to satisfy this need. You can help by cultivating a rain garden, or by filling a container with sand, digging it into the garden, and keeping it damp.

Butterflies also like to bask in the sun. Satisfy this need by placing some rocks or stones in a sunny, protected location for your butterflies to enjoy.

Also remember that butterflies are beautiful insects, and as such, they are susceptible to any pesticides that you use in your garden. Try to limit your use of insecticides. Go organic if possible.



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