

Gardens for Butterflies

Butterflies add an extra dimension of beauty to flower gardens, meadows, roadsides and other natural areas, and are important plant pollinators. The widespread use of chemical pesticides and habitat destruction has reduced their population in recent years, but fortunately for gardeners and nature lovers, it is fairly easy to provide a suitable habitat for many species of butterflies. Whether you're planning a wildflower meadow, a perennial garden devoted to butterflies, or just a few clumps of flowers to attract common species, the following steps will help:

Avoid using poisonous chemicals. Herbicides and pesticides will kill butterflies in both the adult and larval stages.

Locate the garden in a sunny protected area. Butterflies need sun to warm their wings and for orientation. Shelter from strong winds allows them to fly freely.

Observe butterflies in your area and plant the nectar-producing flowers they visit. Butterflies prefer single, tubular blossoms that stand up straight and are easy to land on.

Use large splashes of color and plant for continuous bloom. Butterflies are first attracted to flowers by their color and a large mass is easier for them to spot. They are active from early spring until late fall and need nectar throughout the growing season.

Include caterpillar food plants. These lure females into the garden to lay their eggs and also provide food for the caterpillars.

Provide damp areas or shallow puddles. Some butterflies drink and extract salts from moist soil and sometimes large numbers of males congregate around a puddle to drink.

Place flat stones in the garden for basking. Butterflies are cold-blooded and will sit on a stone or bare soil to bask in the sun which raises body temperature permitting flight.

Nectar Flowers For Butterflies

These attractive perennial wildflowers are excellent nectar sources for butterflies. Unless noted, all prefer sun and well-prepared garden soil. They can be grown in perennial gardens or wildflower meadows. Be sure the wildflowers you purchase have been nursery-propagated, not wild collected. (see "Organizations" for sources).

Aster, New England (*Aster novae-angliae*) Lavender-blue flowers with yellow centers on 3-5' plants in August and September. Likes a rich, moist soil. Other species, including New York aster (*A. novae-belgii*), are also good nectar sources. Many cultivars available.

Bergamot, Wild (*Monarda fistulosa*) Fluffy lavender flowers on 3' plants in June and July. Adapts to poor, dry soil. Red beebalm (*M. didyma*) also attracts hummingbirds; needs slightly moist soil. Cultivars of both available.

Black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia* spp.) Familiar showy yellow daisies with dark centers. A combination of annual, biennial and perennial species and cultivars will provide nectar from early summer until frost.

Blazing Star (*Liatris spicata*) Pinkish-lavender flowering spikes up to 4' tall in July. Pretty with purple coneflower and black-eyed Susans. Several other species are also attractive to butterflies.

Butterfly-weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*) Grows about 2' tall and has clusters of red-orange flowers in June and July. Prefers a slightly dry, well-drained soil. A favorite of Monarchs.

Cardinal Flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*) There is some confusion about whether or not all butterfly species see the color red, but Black Swallowtails visit these fiery 3' spikes in August and September. Needs extra moisture for best performance; will bloom in part shade; attracts hummingbirds. Blue lobelia (*L. siphilitica*) is also a good nectar source.

Coneflower, Purple (*Echinacea purpurea*) Lavender-pink flowers with orange cones on 3-4' plants June through September. Dried seedpods attract birds, especially goldfinches.

Coreopsis (*Coreopsis lanceolata*) This and other coreopsis species and cultivars provide the flat, open flowers that butterflies prefer. They grow about 2' tall, bloom throughout the summer, and adapt to dry soil.

Goldenrod (*Solidago* spp.) Goldenrods provide color and nectar from mid-summer until frost. Usually considered a meadow plant, but many species and cultivars can be grown in the perennial garden including *Solidago sphacelata* 'Golden Fleece' and *S. rugosa* 'Fireworks.'

Ironweed (*Vernonia noveboracensis*) Brilliant purple flowers on plants that grow to 8' in a damp meadows but can be kept lower for the perennial garden by cutting stems back to 2' in early June. Blooms in August and September.

Joe Pye Weed (*Eupatorium* spp.) Grows to 8-10' in its native damp habitat but can be cut back to 2' in early June for shorter blooming plants. Pale pink flower heads are a favorite of many butterflies, especially the Tiger Swallowtail. 'Gateway' is a shorter growing cultivar. Boneset (*E. perfoliatum*) is a good nectar plant for meadows.

Milkweed, Swamp (*Asclepias incarnata*) Pale pink flowers on 2-3' plants in late summer and fall. Prefers moist soil but will grow in ordinary garden soil. This and the common milkweed (*A. syriaca*) and butterfly-weed are favorite nectar and larval food sources for the Monarch.

Phlox (*Phlox* spp.) At 1' with lavender-blue flowers, wild blue phlox (*P. divaricata*) provides nectar in the spring woodland garden. Summer phlox (*P. paniculata*) has magenta flowers on 2-4' plants; many cultivars are available in white and shades of pink and lavender.

Stokes Aster (*Stokesia laevis*) fluffy light blue flowers on 1-2' plants in June and July. Needs good drainage.

Sunflowers (*Helianthus* spp.) Good nectar sources from late summer until frost. Many annual and perennial species and cultivars are available.

Native shrubs providing nectar include native azaleas (*Rhododendron* spp.), Buttonbush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*), Summersweet (*Clethra alnifolia*) and New Jersey Tea (*Ceanothus americanus*). The non-native Butterfly Bush (*Buddleia davidii*) attracts many butterflies to the garden. Non-native nectar producing annuals and perennials include cosmos, lantana, heliotrope, dame's rocket, impatiens, marigolds, pentas, zinnas, 'Autumn Joy' sedum, lavender and gaillardia.

Caterpillar Food Sources

Providing food plants for the larval stage will assure butterflies in larger numbers and greater variety. Butterflies often lay their eggs on the host plant preferred by the caterpillar. Learn to recognize eggs and to identify caterpillars and ensure their survival. Don't panic when you see chewed foliage; usually no permanent damage is done to plants. Some common butterflies and their food plants are:

- Black Swallowtail** – Dill, fennel, and other parsley family members
- Buckeye** – Plantain, gerardia, snapdragon, stonecrop
- Comma** – Nettles, elm
- Eastern Tailed Blue** – Legumes including clover, trefoils, and peas
- Great Spangled Fritillary** – Violets
- Monarch** – Milkweeds
- Mourning Cloak** – Willow, poplar, birch, elm, wild rose
- Painted Lady** – Cudweed, thistles, pussytoes, and other composites
- Pearly Crescent** – Asters
- Pipevine Swallowtail** – Dutchman's-pipe
- Question Mark** – Elm, hackberry, nettles
- Red Admiral** – Nettles
- Red Spotted Purple** – Willow, wild cherry, poplar
- Skippers** – Black locust, legumes
- Spicebush Swallowtail** – Sassafras, spicebush
- Spring Azure** – Dogwood flowers, wild cherry, viburnum, staghorn sumac
- Sulphurs** – Clover and other legumes
- Tiger Swallowtail** – Wild cherry, willow, tulip tree
- Variiegated Fritillary** – Passionflower
- Viceroy** – Willow, poplar, fruit trees
- Zebra Swallowtail** – Pawpaw



Books

- Butterflies of West Virginia and Their Caterpillars**, 1997, Thomas J. Allen.
- Butterflies through Binoculars: a Field and Finding Guide to Butterflies in the Boston-New York-Washington Region**, 1993, Jeffrey Glassberg.
- Butterfly Gardening: Creating Summer Magic in Your Garden**, 1998, Xerces Society and Smithsonian Institution.
- Butterfly Gardening for the South**, 1990, Geyata Ajilvsgi.
- Butterfly Gardens**, 1995, Alcinda Lewis, Brooklyn Botanic Garden Publications.
- The Family Butterfly Book: Projects, activities, and a field guide to 40 favorite North American species**, 2000, Rick Mikula.
- Gardening with Native Plants of the South**, 1994, Sally Wasowski with Andy Wasowski.
- A Gardener's Encyclopedia of Wild Flowers**, 1997, C. Colston Burrell.
- Growing and Propagating Wildflowers of the United States and Canada**, 2000, William Cullina.
- Handbook for Butterfly Watchers**, 1992, Robert M. Pyle.
- Peterson Field Guides:**
 - Eastern Butterflies**, 1992, Paul A. Opler and Vickie Malekeri.
 - First Guide to Caterpillars**, 1993, Amy Bartlett Wright.
 - Wildflowers of Northeastern and North Central America**, 1975, Roger Tory Peterson and Margaret McKenny.

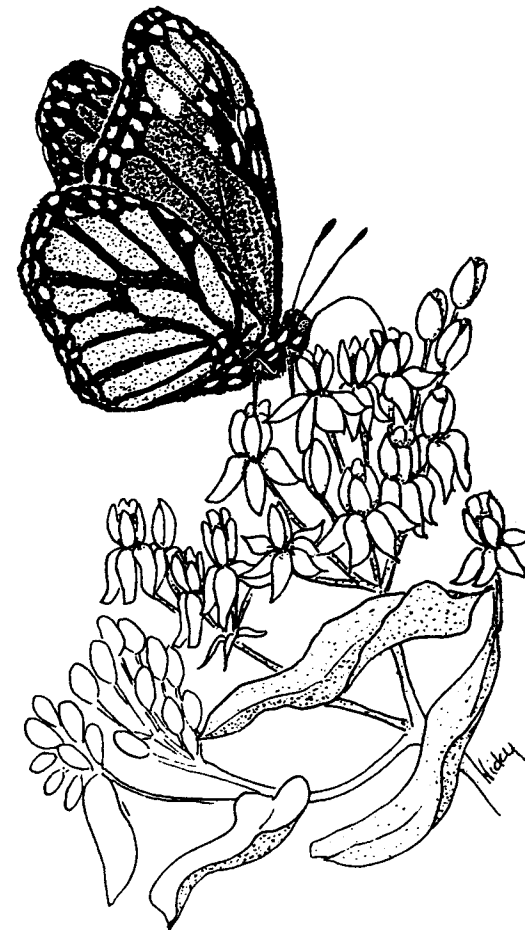


Organizations

- Butterflies of North America**, USGS Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center, www.npwrc.usgs.gov/resource/distr/lepid/bflyusa/bflyusa.htm.
- Butterfly Habitat Garden**, National Museum of Natural History, 10th St. & Constitution Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20560, 202-357-2700, www.si.edu/horticulture/butterfly.html.
- Butterfly Society of Virginia, Inc.**, 510 McCosh Ct., Chesapeake, VA 23320, 757-543-6496.
- National Wildlife Federation**, 11100 Wildlife Center Dr., Reston, VA 20190-5362, 800-822-9919, www.nwf.org.
- Norfolk Botanical Garden**, 6700 Azalea Garden Rd., Norfolk, VA 23518, 757-441-5838, www.virginiagarden.org/gardens.htm.
- North American Butterfly Association, Inc.**, 4 Delaware Rd., Morristown, NJ 07960, www.naba.org.
- Virginia Native Plant Society**, Blandly Experimental Farm, 400 Blandly Farm Ln., Unit 2, Boyce, VA 22620, 540-837-1600, www.vnps.org. Send SASE for "Nursery Sources of Native Plants," a list of suppliers of nursery-propagated native plants.
- Prince William Wildflower Society, A Chapter of the VNPS**, P.O. Box 83, Manassas, VA 20108. Wildflower plant sale in May, membership meetings, wildflower walks and other activities.
- Washington Area Butterfly Club**, Long Branch Nature Center, 625 South Carlin Springs Rd., Arlington, VA 22204, 703-228-6535, www.vais.net/butterfly.

Text: Nancy Arrington
Cover Art: Nicky Staunton

Wildflowers for Butterfly Gardens



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P.O. Box 83
Manassas, VA 20108