



## **Planting a butterfly garden!**

Recently a boy asked me for advice on plants to attract butterflies.

This got me ruminating about my own childhood, growing up with a somewhat fanatical butterfly collector. Any interesting butterfly that drifted through our yard was likely to find itself netted, labeled, and pressed in glass by my mother. (Ruthless entomology apparently runs in my family. My great grandfather, author of *Manual of North American Diptera*, would enliven his lectures by snatching flies from mid-air to identify them, and then return to his prepared text.) In the hopes that our contemporary youth, and you, have a more 'live and let live' attitude towards butterflies, I offer these suggestions.

### **Where should your garden be?**

A sunny location, sheltered from winds if possible. Being cold-blooded, they warm up in the morning by basking. Light-colored rocks placed in areas with morning sun may attract them. Water is not necessary, but males of some species congregate around shallow puddles or damp sand or gravel. Some species are attracted to smelly food sources: stale beer, bird feeders with cut-up fruit, or even manure may draw them!

### **What kind of flowers do they like?**

Colorful, fragrant flowers in shapes that they can get nectar from. They feed with a long tongue (proboscis) which they use to reach the nectar far inside tubular flowers. Plants that attract hummingbirds often attract butterflies.

Butterflies will visit a plant longer if it has numerous tubular flowers in clusters and they can alight on some larger petals. They have compound eyes and can see color, but are near-sighted and respond best to large splashes of color. If you have room, plant large blocks of flowers in the same color range. Annuals from seed are an economical way to do this: a pack of *Cosmos* seed will plant 10- 20', and bloom all summer.

### **Which colors do they like?**

Blue-green apparently doesn't attract them. Various species respond to the pink - purple range, others like red, orange, and even some to white. "Nectar guides" in the form of visually contrasting colors on the petals will guide them towards some flowers, but we humans often don't see those as they are in the ultraviolet spectrum.

## Which plants?

A mix of types that bloom spring through fall. Include some shrubs, lots of perennials, and big patches of seasonal annuals.

**Some favorite annual flowers for butterflies. All are easy to grow in full sun.**

- Borage

Blue flowers nearly year around. Plant from seed any season. Leaves smell like cucumber.

- Cosmos

Plant from seed or starts in late spring. Bloom all summer.

- Marigolds

Plant from seed or starts anytime from early spring to mid-summer.

- Ranunculus

Plant from bulbs in fall or winter. Bloom in spring. Replant each year, unlike most bulbs.

- Snapdragon

Plant from seed or starts in late summer thru winter. Bloom spring to early summer.

- Sweet alyssum

Plant from seed any season. Reseeds.

- Sweet pea

Plant from seed in September - October, or February. Blooms in spring, until hot weather.

- Zinnia

Plant in late spring or summer. Loves heat! Profuse bloom until frost.

**Some favorite perennial flowers for butterflies.**

- Asters, Michaelmas Daisies (*Aster*)

Late summer, fall bloom. Some are California natives. Many species of butterflies visit Asters.

- Beards tongue (*Penstemon*)

Long bloom season, May - September. Also very attractive to hummingbirds and larger bees.

- California fuchsia (*Epilobium*)  
California native with bright orange blooms in fall. Also very attractive to hummingbirds.

- Candytuft (*Iberis*)

Very early bloom in winter and early

spring. Pure white blossoms.

- Columbine (*Aquilegia*)

Spring blooming, shade preferring. A favorite of hummingbirds as well.



Beardstongue (*Penstemon*) flowers require a long proboscis! Skippers, swallowtails love them.



Closeup shows multiple tiny flowers of the Coneflower (*Echinacea*) inflorescence.

- Coneflower (*Echinacea*)

One of the best for butterflies; mid-summer bloom. Many new varieties now available.

- Coreopsis (*Coreopsis*)

Easy, with a profusion of golden blooms from spring through fall.

- Gloriosa daisy (*Rudbeckia*)

Very attractive to butterflies. Plants tend to live 2 - 3 years, so replant new seedlings each fall.

- Goldenrods (*Solidago*)

Look for dwarf varieties. Great mid to late-summer bloom.

- Jupiter's Beard (*Centranthus*)

Blooms April - June, reseeds freely.

- Lily of the Nile (*Agapanthus*)

Very easy to grow, blue or white flowers.

- Milkweed (*Asclepias*)

Often planted as food for Monarch caterpillars, but flowers attract many species of butterflies.

- Pincushion Flower (*Scabiosa*)

Long bloom season, spring through fall. Tough, reliable.

- Pinks (*Dianthus*)

"Annual" types (actually short-lived perennials) bloom in any season. Perennial carnation types bloom April - June and have wonderfully fragrant flowers.

- Sages (*Salvia*)

CA native species are mostly spring bloomers. Other types bloom summer and fall, even into winter. Some of our most rewarding garden plants, especially attractive to hummingbirds.

- Shasta daisy (*Chrysanthemum*)

The big, pure white daisy we all know. Blooms spring to mid-summer, often other times as well. Spreads steadily. Will take some shade.

- Verbena (*Verbena*)

Strong colored flowers all summer. Extremely heat tolerant.

- Wallflower (*Erysimum*)

Little woody perennials that bloom in winter and early spring, often again in fall.

- Yarrow (*Achillea*)

Lots of new varieties with intense colors. Strongly attract beneficial insects as well as butterflies.

### Some favorite shrubs that attract butterflies

- Abelia (*Abelia*)

Blooms off and on spring, summer, fall. Pink forms also attract hummingbirds. Nice informal shrub for sun or shade.

- Bridal wreath (*Spiraea*)

White-flowered varieties bloom late spring. Pink forms bloom in summer.



Milkweed (*Asclepias*) flowers attract many species, and Monarch caterpillars eat the foliage.

- Butterfly-Bush (*Buddleia*, esp. *B. davidii*)

THE butterfly plant! Pink and purple varieties seem most effective. Varieties range from 6' to 12'+. Amenable to occasional hard pruning (spring is best) to control size.

- Coffeeberry (*Rhamnus californica*)

CA native shrub for dry gardens. Winter berries are a nice bonus.

- Coyotebrush (*Baccharis*)

CA native shrub or ground cover with flowers (not showy) that attract many small butterflies and other beneficial insects. Tough, drought tolerant.

- Lantana (*Lantana*)

Bloom heavily from April until frost, attract many types of butterflies as well as hummingbirds. Bright orange, red, yellow, and blended forms available as shrubs. Ground cover forms are purple, white, or yellow. Damaged by frost, but recover.

- Lavender (*Lavandula*)

Fragrant flowers, attractive foliage. Dozens of varieties, varying in height, scent, and color intensity. Drought tolerant. Bloom heavily in late spring and early summer, often other times.

- Lilac (*Syringa*)

The common sweet-smelling lilac (*S. vulgaris*) is very attractive to Swallowtails butterflies. Blooms here in April. Tolerates drought; prefers full sun.

- Pink princess bush (*Escallonia*)

Shrubs to 6' or more with a long spring and summer bloom season. Water deeply, infrequently to avoid iron chlorosis. Prune infrequently to maximize bloom, but can be cut back severely on occasion for size control.

- Rosemary (*Rosmarinus*)

Heavy winter and spring bloom of blue-violet flowers on this traditional cooking herb, with scattered flowers nearly any time. Very tolerant of drought.

- Toyon (*Heteromeles*)

Big CA native shrub. Flowers aren't showy, but they attract small butterflies. Bright red winter berries.

- Waxleaf (and other) Privets (*Ligustrum*)

Ugh. The flowers smell weird and lots of people are allergic to them. Oddly, some butterflies like them. Adaptable, often pruned.

- White Buckwheats, St. Catherine's Lace (*Eriogonum*)

Many CA native species. Grey foliage, interesting white, yellow, or brownish-pink flowers in spring. Prefers drought.

- Wisteria (*Wisteria*)

Powerfully fragrant flowers in late winter on a very vigorous deciduous vine. Swallowtails love them.

### **Some common weeds attract butterflies!**

- Dandelions

Flowers are a source of nectar in winter. Seeds are a source of new dandelions, in your lawn and everywhere nearby as they are wind borne.

- Thistles

Thistle flowers attract butterflies and many beneficial insects. But many thistles are very invasive weeds.

Providing food for larva may be less effective, but can be worth a try. Milkweed (*Asclepias*) is often planted for Monarch caterpillars, and also attracts many adult butterflies. From my own experience, if you plant parsley or fennel you are almost sure to see the brightly-striped caterpillars of the Anise swallowtail at some point. It can be a little disconcerting how much they eat! Caterpillars have *huge* appetites. Fortunately, most are highly selective about their diet, eating only the intended plants. But plant plenty if you're going to share.

### **Two excellent web resources:**

Art Shapiro's Butterfly Site (Dr. Art Shapiro is professor of Evolution and Ecology at UC Davis): <http://butterfly.ucdavis.edu/>

Dave Powell's Butterfly Site has great pictures and is easy to navigate: <http://www.vireos.com/butterflies.html>