



Butterflies in the Garden

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

One of the most delightful summer pastimes, especially when the temperature is cranked up and it is too hot to work in the garden, is to just sit in a quiet, shady spot and observe the wonders of nature surrounding you. Birds are searching for that bit of food or taking a refreshing dip in the birdbath, bees are busily collecting pollen to bring back to their hives, and my favorite, butterflies flitting gracefully from flower to flower sipping nectar through their long proboscis.

There is much you can do to entice these lovely creatures to visit your yard. Like many other creatures, butterflies too are at risk as more of their habitat is taken over for development, native plant species are replaced by exotics, excessive pesticide use and climate change. Even with a garden full of flowers, one will notice that certain butterflies are drawn to certain plants.

If you would like to attract more butterflies to your yard, make a note of which plant species butterflies are congregating about. Likewise, when on walks or visiting friend's gardens, observe other plants of interest to butterflies. Even a small yard, if carefully planted, can entice a fair amount of butterflies to visit.

In general, butterflies can be attracted to a wide variety of plants. Some butterflies are more specific in their plant needs, and hence selection, than others.

Common garden flowers sought after by various butterflies include coneflowers, coreopsis, veronica, butterfly weed, goldenrods, Joe Pye weed, zinnias, beebalm, lupines, yarrow, sedums, asters, cosmos and liatris. Although my tall garden phlox does not attract hordes of butterflies, in midsummer it is regularly visited by hummingbird moths, a marvelous creature often at first mistaken for a hummingbird. I have noticed it prefers the brighter colored phlox more than the white cultivars.

Even container plants should not be overlooked as a source of nectar for those with limited space. Verbena, alyssum, nicotiana, single marigolds, daisies, dianthus and lantana are a few suggestions for container plantings bound to be visited by colorful butterflies.

Of course, if space permits, the use of native wildflowers, grasses, trees, shrubs and vines creates the most suitable habitat for butterflies and their larvae. Do not forget that the life cycle of the butterfly includes a larval stage, known as a caterpillar. As gardeners know, caterpillars can be voracious eaters and some defoliation must be tolerated for the butterfly to complete its lifecycle.



Just as the various butterfly species are drawn to certain flowers for nectar, they are also selective about which plants are used for egg-laying purposes. Plant chosen must be suitable for larval development.

Depending on the species of butterfly, larval food includes many tree and shrub species such as black cherry, oak, hickory, ash, poplar, birch, sassafras, elm, willow, spicebush, lilac, dogwoods and viburnums. A bit more weedy species that provide suitable larval food include various grasses, wild everlastings, amaranth, milkweed, clover, lamb's quarters, violets, and asters and other composites.

Monarch larvae can only feed and develop on various species of milkweed. Consider creating a Monarch Waystation (www.monarchwatch.org).



Swallowtail butterfly larvae are often found feeding on Queen Anne's lace, parsley, dill and other umbelliferous plants. That 'parsley worm' munching on your patch of Italian flat parsley should be left alone as it will soon be transformed into a beautiful black swallowtail butterfly.

Adding nectar and larval food source plants to your garden as well as tolerance of feeding by caterpillars will help establish a healthy butterfly population in your backyard. Do also consider a source of water, like a puddling pool. Fill a shallow saucer with coarse sandy soil and sink into the soil in your butterfly garden. Keep moist and the butterflies will appreciate the water as well as the mineral salts.

For more information on plants to add to your garden to attract butterflies or queries on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.