



Butterfly Gardens : Flying Flowers!

To invite butterflies into your garden, cluster plants together by species and color so they will see large splashes of color, particularly those with red, orange, yellow, and purple flowers. For a season of butterfly visits, choose flowers that bloom at different times so your garden provides nectar from spring through autumn. Even though there are fewer choices that bloom from August to October, these are particularly vital, as migrating butterflies will be seeking nectar sources to strengthen their reserves. Choose the native flowers which have evolved alongside their pollinator partners and your garden will attract a wide variety of butterflies. Non-natives and hybrids of natives may also be enticing nectar sources, especially herbs, and those with scented and/or single flowers. Leaving an area to go wild is a great idea too, as many “weeds” such as clover, Queen Anne’s lace and dandelions are quite attractive to butterflies.

Planting to Attract Caterpillars

If you want to support the full life cycle of butterflies you must also include host plants in your garden. Butterflies will lay their eggs on these host plants and their caterpillars will feed on the leaves once they have emerged. The larvae must feed on specific plants and female butterflies will only lay their eggs on these plants. This specificity is so strong that most caterpillars will starve to death if they cannot find their host plants soon after emerging from the egg. Research the butterfly you would like to attract and then plant accordingly. Remember that their purpose is to serve as a food source for the caterpillars. Defoliation and bare twigs are signs of your garden’s success as a welcoming butterfly haven.

Garden Design and Maintenance

Locate your butterfly garden in a sunny and open area with some protection from wind. Butterflies need the sun to warm their blood and flight muscles. Create basking sites for your butterflies by placing large, flat, light-colored rocks in full sun. In addition to nectar, butterflies need minerals and water. They get the moisture and minerals they need from moist areas around water in a process called “puddling.” Use a shallow, water-proof container and bury it just to the level of the soil in a sunny spot that is out of the wind and near the nectar plants. Fill it almost to the top with wet sand. Add a few twigs or rocks on top of the sand for perches. Butterflies spend more than half of their day at rest or “roosting.” They find a roost in the early afternoon and will then spend the night there. They will also roost during cold or wet weather. Planting a variety of trees, shrubs and grasses will give your butterflies a wide range of roosting options at various heights. As you maintain your garden, it is important for you to reduce to zero the use of herbicides and pesticides. Even those labeled as organic may kill butterflies and caterpillars: read labels and follow all instructions.

For More Information:

Our tip sheet “Butterfly and Moth Plant List” is a compilation of nectar and host plants and the Midwest butterflies they attract, edited to reflect the plants usually available at Bowood Farms. The North American Butterfly Association is a great resource: <http://nababutterfly.com/basics-of-butterfly-gardening/>. As plant growers, we support the Monarch Waystation program and its “Bring Back the Monarchs” campaign: find out more at <http://monarchwatch.org/>.