

Starting a Butterfly Garden

Starting a butterfly garden is easy. When starting a butterfly garden there are two goals; the first is to attract adult butterflies and the second is to ensure further generations of butterflies are created. The right location and amount of plants will draw the butterflies in. Then providing host plants in addition to nectar plants guarantees butterflies will reproduce. Some of the most common butterflies seen in Northern Illinois are Swallowtails, Monarchs, Red Spotted Purples and Viceroy's.

Garden Location

- You need to be able to easily grow the correct nectar-producing flowers butterflies need. That means locating a sunny site (at least 6 hours of direct sunlight is best) which preferably is protected from intense wind. It's best to avoid very windy areas like hilltops or wide-open spaces that receive west wind. Remember that butterflies expend less energy flying in sunny, calm air. They also use the sun for orientation and to warm their wings. Hence why location truly is important! In addition to a sunny, less windy location butterflies need to be able to find your garden. Don't hide it from them in small areas or behind large bushes. If the bed is near a fence or bushes plant their nectar sources a few feet out from them.

Site Soil

- After choosing a proper location check the soil type. Is your soil loamy black dirt or hardpan clay? Most butterfly plants thrive in soil rich in organic matter that drains well. Adding compost will improve the soil structure and add the nutrients necessary for plants to thrive. A standard practice is to add 3 inches of aged compost to the top of your soil and mix it in at least 8 inches deep. Plan on adding an additional 1-2 inches of aged compost each spring to feed the soil food web.
- Another thing to consider is how you will keep weeds at bay. The use of herbicides in pollinator beds is highly frowned upon. After planting, 3-4 inches of finely shredded mulch should be added. The mulch can be old grass clippings, chopped up leaves, or wood chips. Try to avoid using dyed mulch (like the bright red wood chips) or ink covered mulch (like shredded newspaper).

Attracting the Butterflies

- Plant in masses! That means a minimum of 3-4 plants each. The more, the better! Aside from amount you also need to consider color. Adult butterflies are attracted to red, yellow, orange, pink, and purple blossoms. Large plantings of brightly colored flowers draw the butterflies in like magnets. It's also better to plant flowers that are flat topped (like echinacea) or flowers are clustered with short tube-like blossoms (like salvia). Butterflies use a proboscis to eat. A proboscis is like a curled-up straw they extend into flowers to absorb nutrients.
- After the butterflies eat, they'll need a place to rest. Consider adding flat topped stones in your garden for the butterflies to nap and bask in the sun. Also consider adding a place for butterflies to go "puddling". Butterflies often congregate on wet sand and mud for "puddling" which is essentially drinking water and extracting minerals. You can easily add a butterfly puddle by placing coarse sand in a shallow pan (or birdbath) in the bed. Mist the sand daily to keep it moist.

Host Plants

- A host plant is what butterflies lay their eggs on. When those eggs hatch the caterpillars eat said plant. To have a successful butterfly garden it MUST contain nectar sources and host plants.

Butterfly Host Plants					
Monarchs		Swallowtails		Red Spotted Purples	
Scientific	Common	Scientific	Common	Scientific	Common
Asclepias i.	Swamp Milkweed	Anethum	Dill	Amelanchier	Serviceberry
Asclepias s.	Common Milkweed	Foeniculum	Fennel	Betula	Birch Tree
Asclepias t.	Orange Milkweed	Liriodendron	Tulip Tree	Prunus	Cherry Tree
		Petroselinum	Parsley	Salix	Willows

Nectar Sources

- To attract and keep butterflies to your garden you'll need plants that are sources of nectar that bloom throughout the season.
- Accessibility to the nectar is key. Some flowers just don't work well for butterflies. For example, think of trumpet vine. The flowers are perfect for hummingbirds but too deep for butterflies to feed on.
- Flowers that have been cultivated for eye-catching beauty might have been bred out of the food-providing category too. Some just no longer produce nutritious nectar and some just don't allow butterflies to feed. Modern marigolds have been cultivated for flowers with double and triple blooms which, while lovely to see, won't let a butterfly proboscis enter. A perennial example is echinacea with the pom-pom like, double flowered blooms. The traditional looking coneflower is still a better nectar source. In choosing the plants for your butterfly garden, you may find it helpful to think like a hungry butterfly.

Butterfly Nectar Sources					
Early Season		Mid Season		Late Season	
Scientific	Common	Scientific	Common	Scientific	Common
Agastache	Hyssop	Achillea	Yarrow	Allium	Ornamental Onion
Baptisia	False Indigo	Asclepias t.	Orange Milkweed	Aster	Hardy Aster
Callirhoe	Winecups	Asclepias i.	Swamp Milkweed	Chelone	Turtlehead
Campanula	Bellflower	Echinacea	Coneflower	Chrysanthemum	Hardy Mum
Coreopsis	Tickseed	Echinops	Globe Thistle	Eupatorium	Joe Pye Weed
Dianthus	Garden Pinks	Hemerocallis	Daylily	Helianthus	False Sunflower
Lupinus	Lupine	Leucanthemum	Shasta Daisy	Lobelia	Cardinal Flower
Nepeta	Catmint	Liatris	Blazing Star	Physostegia	Obedient Plant
Penstemon	Beardtongue	Monarda	Beebalm	Origanum	Ornamental Oregano
Phlox	Creeping Phlox	Phlox	Garden Phlox	Sedum	Stonecrop
Primula	Primrose	Rudbeckia	Blackeyed Susan	Solidago	Goldenrod
Pulmonaria	Lungwort	Salvia	Meadow Sage	Verbena	Blue Vervain
Scabiosa	Pincushion Flower	Stokesia	Stokes Aster	Vernonia	Ironweed