

Starting a butterfly garden

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Starting is easy, especially if you already have a flowerbed. Just remember for a butterfly garden you have two goals: the first is to attract adult butterflies to come into your garden and the second is to ensure further generations of butterflies by providing a place for eggs and caterpillars.

Look for a sunny site. Avoid very windy areas like hilltops. Flight is less work in sun and calm air. Don't forget, they're looking for food. Location is everything. You want to be able to grow the nectar-producing flowers butterflies need. You also want the butterflies to be able to spot your garden; so don't hide it from them.

Plant bold masses of bright flowers. That will bring them in. To keep them feeding take a look at how they feed. Butterflies have a proboscis they use for eating - it's pretty much a curled up straw they can extend into flowers to drink nectar. They'll stay and feed longer where there are lots of flowers with accessible nectar.

The kinds of flowers you'll want to plant will provide the butterfly a place to land and be able to reach the nectar with his proboscis. There are many possibilities. Ask at your garden center. Many plants are being labeled "for butterflies". As a rule of thumb, think of the butterfly bush (*Buddleia* sp.). The blooms are actually small bunches of tiny flowers. Butterflies can land on the bloom and spend a long time drinking without spending a lot of energy flying around. Some others that meet this standard are the native Joe Pye weed (*Eupatorium maculatum*), the golden rods (*Solidago* spp.), butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), and *Verbena bonariensis*.

Accessibility to the nectar is key. Some flowers just don't suit. Take the trumpet vine. The flowers are perfect for hummingbirds to stick their beak into and eat, but would prove too deep for butterfly feeding. 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. Marigolds have been cultivated for flowers with double and triple blooms, which, while lovely to see, won't let a butterfly proboscis enter. In choosing the plants for your butterfly garden, you may find it helpful to think like a hungry butterfly.

Once fed, butterflies will leave your garden to look for suitable egg-laying sites. Your butterfly garden can provide these sites and keep them near by.

Butterflies lay eggs on plants that the caterpillars (larvae) will eat. This sounds simple enough until you ask the caterpillars what they want and you find out everybody wants something different! Each butterfly will lay eggs on a specific host plant. When the caterpillars hatch they immediately start eating so it's important to be on the right food plant.

What kind of butterflies do you have at your blooms? And what host plants are they looking for? There are lots of good resources to find out which caterpillars eat what.

Check the library or the Internet for help.

Of course, that means you'll be planting your butterfly garden with greens meant for bugs to eat. Not what most people think of when planting a garden! Some easy garden plants you'll want to include in your butterfly garden to feed larvae are dill and parsley for black swallowtails, pearly everlasting and Erygium for American ladies, violets for fritillaries and milkweeds for monarchs.

Milkweed is the only plant monarch caterpillars will eat. It may be the most important plant for your garden this summer. Every fall, monarchs migrate to the mountains of central Mexico. They safely spend the winter months in the high altitude forest canopy. This winter a freak cold rainstorm followed by freezing temperatures killed millions of monarchs. They'll be back in our garden this summer and looking for milkweed.

One final word about butterfly gardens: next fall when it's "clean-up time", please don't clear everything out of the bed. Some butterflies overwinter right here as eggs, larvae, adults, or as a chrysalis. They can be wrapped in leaves, under mulch, or inside hollow stems waiting to emerge the next spring for you to enjoy.

For more information look for Peterson's Guide to Caterpillars, A Golden Guide: Butterflies and Moths, Stokes Butterfly Book and many others available at the library or for sale through some of the links provided below.

There are many web sites available for butterfly lovers. Here are a few to get you started:

North American Butterfly Association: www.naba.org

Monarch Watch Univ. of Kansas: www.monarchwatch.org

- Butterflies of Maryland:
www.npwrc.usgs.gov/resource/distr/lepid/bflyusa/md/toc.htm
- Maryland Native Plants: www.mdflora.org

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