from spring to fall, the
front courtyard garden at my Ore-
gon home becomes a butterfly magnet alive with colorful motion. The
garden is frequented by many species, in-
cluding swallowtails, blues, painted
drakes, California sisters, and my child-
hood favorite, the ever sociable skipper.
And every year without fail we have new
generations of butterflies that come to
visit and linger in the garden.
There are more than 800 species of
butterflies in North America (not to men-
tion over 10,000 moth species). The best
way to lure these winged wonders to your
garden is by enticing them with the crea-
ture comforts we all need for survival:
food, water, shelter, and places where their
young can grow. But even the best of gar-
den designs can lack magnetic potential if
you don’t know which butterflies reside in
your area or visit during migration.
Familiarizing yourself with the butter-
fly species that are common to your region
will help in selecting appropriate plants to
grow to attract them, which is especially
important if space is limited. Butterflies
feed from a wide variety of nectar flowers,
but each species does have their favorites
and these don’t always overlap. More im-
portant, butterflies only lay their eggs on
the specific host plants for the larval stage
of their life cycle because caterpillars often
require very specialized diets.
Many resources are available that can
help you learn about local butterfly
species, including your cooperative exten-
sion office, regional guidebooks, conser-
vation groups in your area, and specific
organizations that offer information about
butterflies and other pollinators (see “Re-
sources,” page 33).
No matter where you live or
what size your garden, there
are many things you can do to
encourage butterflies and
moths to visit your garden.

BY KRIS WETHERBEE

A swallowtail butterfly sips nectar from scarlet beebalm (Monarda didyma).

bring on the
Butterflies

NECTAR SOURCES
A garden with drifts of colorful flowers
laden with sweet nectar will entice a wide
variety of butterflies to visit. Not all flow-
ers are created equal, however, at least
from a butterfly’s perspective. The flower’s
color, shape, and fragrance will attract but-
terflies to varying degrees, but the quanti-
ty and accessibility of the nectar is what
will cause them to stay and feed.

Butterflies taste with their feet, which
are equipped with special receptors for
sweetness. When those receptors find a
nectar-laden treasure, these insects will un-
coil their tubular tongues (called pro-
boscises) and use them like straws. Once a
butterfly discovers its favorite flowers, it
will return to that location again and again.

Adult butterflies typically have very
cosmopolitan tastes, which are best
served with a smorgasbord of nectar-rich
flowers with a variety of floral shapes. Re-
gionally native plants are ideal because
these are the plants the butterflies evolved
of nectar-rich composites. Plants that
bear inflorescences composed of many
small flowers, bell-shaped flowers, and
tubular flowers also lure butterflies into
the garden.

To keep butterflies coming to your
garden all season long, include plants that
bloom at different times of the year. For
example, you might include spring-
blooming plants such as diantus, lilacs
(Syringa spp.), lupines, and phlox; span
the hot summer months with beebalm
(Monarda spp.), coneflowers, milkweeds
(Acelepias spp.), lavenders (Lavandula
spp.), and penstemons; then wrap up
with fall-blooming plants such as asters,
salvia, mums, sedum, and goldenrods
(Solidago spp.).

Another way to enhance your garden’s
appeal to pollinators is to include layers of
plants that flower at different heights—
this takes advantage of the vertical space
that goes unused in many yards. Flowering
vines are a particularly efficient way to
do this in small gardens.
Not all butterflies seek out nectar from
flowers, so don’t neglect supplying other
sources of food. Mourning cloaks, red-
spotted purples, tawny emperors, and a

Danaus plexippus, sometimes called the monarch, is one of the most familiar varieties of butterfly. It is well known for its migratory behaviors, which can include journeys as far as 1400 miles. The monarch butterfly undergoes a remarkable transformation from caterpillar to adult. The caterpillar of the monarch butterfly lives on milkweeds, which are native to North America. The adult monarch butterfly is known for its bright orange wings with black and white bands. They are well adapted to feeding on nectar from a wide variety of flowers, including milkweeds. Monarchs are also recognized for their long-distance migration patterns, which involve multiple generations traveling to overwintering sites in Mexico. This image shows a monarch butterfly perched on a flower, demonstrating its characteristic coloration and its role in the ecosystem as both a pollinator and a creature that seeks nectar-rich flowers for sustenance. The photograph captures the elegance and beauty of this butterfly, highlighting its importance in the study of wildlife and the understanding of migratory patterns.
Milkweed, shown flowering, above, is a host plant for the striped larva of monarch butterflies, above right. An adult monarch, right, sips nectar from a verbena flower.

adult females may linger to lay their eggs as long as the appropriate host plants are available. And catering to caterpillars by growing host plants leads to more butterflies flitting around the garden throughout the seasons.

Unlike their more generalized parents, caterpillars are very picky eaters. As a result, the female of each species seeks out a specific plant or plants on which to lay its eggs. This is where knowing the butterfly species common to your area really comes in handy.

Monarch caterpillars, for example, feed exclusively on milkweed (Asclepias spp.), while pearl crescent caterpillars dine primarily on asters. Tiger swallowtails seek out tulip poplar and cherry trees, while black and anise swallowtail caterpillars dine on dill, fennel, and parsley. Fritillaries adore violets, red admirals feast mainly on hocks and thistles.

In keeping with what caterpillars are champion eaters. A monarch butterfly larva, for example, gains about 2,000 times its weight in two weeks or less. As a result, host plants may look somewhat ragged and defoliated. The nectarines might be less noticeable if you mingle them among other plantings, hide them in the back of the border, or confine them to a back corner of the yard. Any cosmetic deficiencies will seem well worthwhile once you start seeing all the newly emerged butterflies.

WATER WORKS
Nectar alone does not provide for all the nutrients that butterflies need. Butterflies seek water for certain minerals. Even a simple water source, such as soaker hoses filled with wet sand or soil. Create places for butterflies to perch by positioning a few sticks or rocks on top of the sand, and be sure to refill the bucket before it runs dry.

Another way to enhance your garden’s appeal to butterflies is to provide a moist “puddling” site like this one, where they can gather to drink up needed nutrients.

Concentrated at the water evaporates from the puddle. As a result, butterflies often continue visiting these puddling sites until they’re nearly dry. You can create an artificial puddle by burying an old pail or plastic container filled with wet sand or soil. Create places for butterflies to perch by positioning a few sticks or rocks on top of the sand, and be sure to refill the bucket before it runs dry.

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SUNSHINE AND SHELTER
Situate your butterfly garden in a sheltered area that receives at least six hours of direct sunlight daily. Being cold-blooded creatures, butterflies need sunshine and warmth in order to fly. At 60 degrees Fahrenheit they begin to flutter and launch their colorful flight. Their flight improves as temperatures rise and the sun dries their wings. Butterflies also bask in the sun to absorb heat so they can fly when temperatures are lower. Help them out by placing flatish rocks, paving stones, or other heat-absorbing material in the sunnier areas of your garden. If the location is right, this may become a butterfly sunbathing station.

A windbreak of trees or shrubs will give butterflies a place to hide from the elements and rest at night. An open shed or any nearby evergreen or broad-leaved deciduous trees serve as good shelter sites. Leave a few fallen leaves, pieces of tree bark, and other natural detritus where they fall so butterflies will have places to crawl underneath for shelter. A loosely stacked log or rock pile also creates a safe haven with its many open nooks and crannies.

AVOIDING INSECTICIDES
Most pesticides—including the ones labeled organic—are just as lethal to beneficial wildlife as they are to their target pests. So if you want butterflies and other pollinators, avoid using pesticides or restrict their use to small areas of your garden.

Instead of relying on pesticides, try giving nature a chance. A few weeds and pest insects are a natural and essential part of any healthy habitat. It’s when ecosystems get out of balance—a condition that can be triggered by persistent pesticide use—that pest insects likely become abundant enough to cause significant damage. You are off to a good start by growing the nectar plants and host plants butterflies seek, because this will also encourage other beneficials—including predatory insects such as lady beetles and lacewings—to take up residence in your garden, which will help keep pest populations in check.

Resources
BOOKS


ORGANIZATIONS


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Flattish rocks in a sunny part of the garden offer butterflies a site to bask on cool days.
CONTAINER BUTTERFLY PLANTS

Whether in the form of planters, hanging baskets, or window box gardens, container plantings are a quick and compact way to dish up a portable feast for butterflies, especially where space is limited.

The key to creating an attractive display that both people and butterflies can enjoy is to have some of the same color themes and plant types in a container while varying the heights, textures, and bloom times. You can achieve this by combining trailing, bushy, and upright plants—either by grouping pots, each containing a single species, or by planting several species in one container. You can also arrange your containers at varying heights by putting them on bricks, pedestals, upside-down pots, or plant stands.

To get the most out of your butterfly container gardens, place them in areas you spend a lot of time in or can view from inside the house, such as a patio, deck, courtyard, or entrance area. You can also use potted plants to fill in bare spaces in a newly planted perennial bed or garden border. Stagger them on steps, encircle a tree, or use them to line a walkway or path.

Whatever your butterfly attraction of choice is a container garden, a small bed, or an entire garden or meadow, one thing is for certain: With a little planning and the right selection of plants, it’s easy to provide an enticing habitat for butterflies—not to mention other pollinators and hummingbirds—and a beautiful oasis for yourself.

PROVEN PERFORMERS FOR BUTTERFLIES

The following plant genera are easy to grow and broadly adaptable in North America. Most include a range of species that are native to different regions; consult regional guides or the resources listed on page 33 to identify species that do best in your area. Note, the butterflies listed with each plant group are just the ones most commonly associated with the genus; other types of butterflies may also visit these plants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common name (Botanical name)</th>
<th>Height/Spread (feet)</th>
<th>Ornamental features</th>
<th>Butterflies</th>
<th>USDA, AHS Zones</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aster</strong> (Aster spp.)</td>
<td>2-5/1-3</td>
<td>Clusters of white to purple flowers late summer to fall</td>
<td>bf, bl, cp, mo, pl, sk, su, wh</td>
<td>Zones vary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Beehives</strong> (Monarda spp.)</td>
<td>1-4/4-1</td>
<td>Annuals and perennials with aromatic foliage and summer flowers</td>
<td>bl, wh</td>
<td>Zones vary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Milkweeds</strong> (Asclepias spp.)</td>
<td>2-6/1-3</td>
<td>Easy-care perennials with clusters of tubular flowers in summer</td>
<td>bf, bl, cp, hs, mo, pl, sk, su, st</td>
<td>Zones vary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chrysanthemums</strong> (Chrysanthemum spp.)</td>
<td>1-4/1-3</td>
<td>Perennials and annuals with colorful flowers in late summer</td>
<td>bf, mo, sk, su, st</td>
<td>Zones vary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coreopsies, tickseeds</strong> (Coreopsis spp.)</td>
<td>2-4/1-2</td>
<td>Easy-care perennials and annuals with yellow flowers in spring to summer</td>
<td>bf, mo, pl, sk, su</td>
<td>Zones vary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Salvias</strong> (Salvia spp.)</td>
<td>2-8/2-6</td>
<td>Fast-growing annuals or warm-climate shrubs with colorful summer flowers</td>
<td>hs, mo, sk, su, st, wh</td>
<td>4-9, 9-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lavanders</strong> (Lavandula spp.)</td>
<td>1-4/2-4</td>
<td>Drought-tolerant perennials or shrubs with spikes of white to purple summer flowers</td>
<td>hs, pl, sk, su, st, wh</td>
<td>Zones vary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Zinnias</strong> (Zinnia spp.)</td>
<td>1-5/1-3</td>
<td>Annuals and perennials with spikes of colorful tubular flowers in summer</td>
<td>hs, pl, su, sk, su, st, wh</td>
<td>Zones vary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lantanas</strong> (Lantana spp.)</td>
<td>1-4/1-2</td>
<td>Heat-loving annuals that bloom from summer until frost</td>
<td>mo, pl, sk, su, st, wh</td>
<td>9-11, 12-1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

bf = brushfoots; bl = blues; cp = coppers; hs = hairstreaks; mo = monarchs; pl = painted ladies; sk = skippers; su = sulphurs; st = swallowtails; wh = whites

*Good for containers

Where garden space is limited, you can grow nectar-rich plants like verbena in containers to attract butterflies. Where garden space is limited, you can grow nectar-rich plants like verbena in containers to attract butterflies.

Kris Wetherbee’s garden in Oakland, Oregon, is a haven for butterflies.