Butterfly Gardening Basic Guidelines

“Butterflies add a dimension to the landscape that cannot be duplicated – splashes of moving color in an otherwise stationary setting. Butterflies have an unequaled ability to inject an aura of magic and wonder into the heart of the mundane urban center.”

Craig Huegel

How do you attract butterflies? Butterflies have basic needs, so design your garden to meet their needs.

NEEDS

1. Food
   Colorful flowers that provide nectar will attract adult butterflies but to have them move in, you need to provide food for caterpillars (larvae) and upon which the adults will lay eggs. Butterflies’ food requirements are different for different phases of their life cycle.

   a. Larval (Host) Plants
      Each butterfly species has specific plants upon which they will lay eggs. These plants then become the food source for the caterpillars. Larval plants get chewed and eaten by caterpillars, but will grow back. When planting larval plants it is critical that you plant enough to sustain a generation of caterpillars. These are usually vines, scrubs or trees.

   b. Nectar Plants
      These are the colorful flowers that provide the sweet nectar required by adult butterflies.

2. Water
   Butterflies extract water and minerals from mud. Providing a shallow ground level container of damp soil should meet this requirement.

3. Shelter
   Mulch and low growing plants including grasses and ferns will provide shelter for caterpillars. Caterpillars often attach their chrysalis to a branch on a nearby plant other than their host plant, so it is important to have other plants nearby. Woody plants and shrubs will provide butterflies shelter during bad weather and at night. We recommend you provide shelter with native larval and nectar plants.
LOCATION
Locate your garden in the sun. Butterflies like to feed in sunny areas. The same type and color of plant when clustered together seems to be more attractive to butterflies than a variety of colors and types of plants.

MAINTENANCE
Your garden will require maintenance, but do not try to keep your butterfly garden too neat- butterflies like it messy. Hand-pulling of unwanted plants is recommended. Be aware that some of the plants that butterflies love, such as passion vine, Spanish needles and thistle, can become a nuisance if not kept under control.

RESPONSIBILITIES
There are responsibilities involved when you decide to invite butterflies into your yard. You need to realize you are also inviting other pollinators such as bees and wasps that will be attracted to nectar plants.

You must never use pesticides. Butterflies are insects and very susceptible to poisoning. You do not want to kill caterpillars with poisoned leaves, or adult butterflies with poisoned nectar.

One of life’s pleasures is watching these gloriously-colored creatures float and flutter in your garden. If you provide butterflies with a healthy environment that meets their needs, you should have no problems attracting them to your yard.