Butterfly Gardens

Butterflies are beautiful, colorful insects, a delight to watch in the garden. Butterflies visit a garden not for our enjoyment but to look for food and places to lay their eggs. To attract butterflies in your garden, it takes just a little knowledge. Gardens for butterflies can be large, small or even in containers; the basic requirements are always the same.

Butterflies need:

FOOD: Butterflies drink nectar, a sweet liquid found in flower blossoms, as their food source. Butterflies use their long proboscis like a straw to drink the fluid from flower tubules.

WARMTH: Butterflies need to warm their wings in order to fly. At temperatures below 60 ° F their body fluid thickens and limits their wing movement. (Most nectar flowers are full sun plants also).

SHELTER: Butterflies need shelter from wind. Strong breezes make it harder for them to land to feed; it inhibits their flight and uses up their energy.

WATER: Besides nectar, butterflies drink water from shallow pools like a mud puddle (not birdbaths). A rock with a depression or saucer filled with sand and water to form a small depressed pool works well.

Creating a butterfly garden:

Creating a garden to attract adult butterflies to your patio, deck or garden requires that you accommodate their needs. First pick a site in full sun—not less than six hours a day—and protected from wind, perhaps by a wall, fence or hedge. If you are using a container, chose one which is large enough to accommodate the root balls of several nectar producing plants.

Select nectar-producing plants with flowers that are yellow, orange, red, purple or pink, and are clustered or flat topped with short tubes from which the butterfly can drink with its proboscis. Be certain to include a place for the butterfly to warm its wings nearby, a large flat rock or a plant with large leaves will do. Water from a nearby mud puddle or shallow dish is essential. Always remember to avoid using pesticides or herbicides as they will kill adult and larval butterflies.

Nectar Plants:

ANNUALS: ageratum, calibrachoa, cosmos, lantana, marigold, nasturtium, nicotianna, verbena, zinnia

PERENNIALS: bee balm, black-eyed Susan, butterfly weed, candytuft, catmint, chives, columbine, coreopsis, delphinium, dianthus, echinacea, liatris, lupine, phlox, salvia, sedum, Shasta daisy

TREES and SHRUBS: butterfly bush, low bush blueberry, viburnum, spirea, hibiscus, plum, redbud and pear trees

Encourage more butterflies: While you can attract butterflies to your garden by providing just a nectar source, you will attract many more by also having host plants in your garden. Host plants (such as violets, pansies, sunflowers, asters, butterfly weed, white turtlehead, fennel, clover, dill and parsley) may suffer chewed leaves, but are necessary for the growth cycle of butterflies. These hosts can be planted in your garden or in containers placed in less visible spots.

Selecting native plants is important for many of our native butterflies who cannot develop and survive on non-native species. Some butterflies only lay their eggs on specific plants. For example the monarch butterflies larvae only eat Asclepias, the milkweed plant. If you want to encourage specific butterflies you need to grow the particular plant they prefer. There are many books and web sites available that provide more information as you build your butterfly garden.