

Create a Butterfly Garden

Butterfly watching is a fascinating outdoor activity that you can enjoy in your own backyard. You can create a garden that attracts butterflies by adding to an existing landscape or making a specialty garden. A successful butterfly garden provides food, water, shelter and places to lay eggs.

The butterfly has four distinct life stages: egg, caterpillar, chrysalis and adult. The basic needs change as the body changes. A female butterfly lays her eggs on the leaves of a host plant that will provide food for the caterpillar stage. The host plant must also provide enough cover to conceal the eggs from predators. Security and some protection from the elements are factors at the chrysalis stage. Adults need nectar from flowers and some eat bird droppings.

Larval-host Plants

Wildflowers

Angelica
Anise Hyssop
Bleeding Hearts
Butterfly Weed
Giant Hyssop
Lomatiums
Lupines
Pearly Everlasting
Rockcross
Sedums
Stinging Nettle
Wild Rye Grass
Wild Strawberry

Shrubs

Cinquefoil
Huckleberry
Mountain Balm
Oceanspray
Red-flowering Currant
Spirea
Wild Lilac
Wild Rose

Trees

Ash
Aspens
Big-leaf Maple
Cascara
Cottonwood
Douglas Fir
Oak
Pines
True Fir
Wild Cherry
Willows

The arrangement of space in your garden is important. Nectar plants should be located near the host plants to provide ready access for the emerging and hungry butterfly.

Although there are exotic plants that attract butterflies, this article will focus on plants that are native to our region. Our native butterflies have long-standing and interdependent relationships with these plants.

Larval-host Plants

Butterfly larvae are herbivores. Each species depends on specific plants for food. Some butterfly species have one specific host plant species that they must utilize. If that particular plant is no longer available, the caterpillar will starve to death. The larval-host plant provides much more than just food; it offers shelter, camouflage and chemical compounds critical for protection, courtship and reproduction.

The slow moving caterpillar has several defense mechanisms to protect it from predators such as birds, wasps and small mammals. It will hide amongst the foliage. Many have camouflage coloring to help them blend in with their surroundings. Some species emit a bad smell to chase off predators. Others use poison provided by the host plant when ingested by the caterpillar. This toxicity keeps it from becoming prey. An example of the butterfly and plant interdependence is *Asclepias speciosa*, (Showy Milkweed) and Monarch butterflies. Eggs are laid on its leaves so that the black and green larva can feed on them. The leaves contain bitter and toxic glucosides, which accumulate in the body. This makes the butterfly distasteful to birds. In addition, the flowers provide nectar. Butterflies return the favor by acting as the agent of pollination for the plant, ensuring the plant's reproductive success and therefore its continuation as a species.

A butterfly garden that is limited to nectar plants will draw in butterflies during their adult stage. Larval-host plants will keep them there throughout all four of their life stages. Put the larval-host plants in the back border of your garden area where holes in the leaves will not be noticeable. Be sure to look for chrysalis, caterpillars, or eggs during the winter on your host plants so you can have the pleasure of observing the transformation into a beautiful butterfly.

Nectar Plants

Wildflowers

Anise Hyssop
Asters
Brodiaea
Butterfly Weed
Gayfeather
Giant Hyssop
Goldenrod
Hairy Honeysuckle
Joe Pye Weed
Lomatium
Lupine
Monkeyflower
Orange Honeysuckle
Oregon Sunshine
Pearly Everlasting
Penstemon
Purple Coneflower
Sea Thrift
Sedums
Showy milkweed
Sitka Columbine
Wild Bergamot

Shrubs

Huckleberry
Indian Plum
Kinnikinnik
Labrador Tea
Manzanita
Mock Orange
Oceanspray
Pacific Rhododendron
Red-flowering Currant
Red-twig Dogwood
Spirea
Wild Lilacs
Wild Rose

Trees

Cherry
Hawthorn
Madrone
Willows

Nectar Plants

Females also seek out larval-host plants near the nectar plants so create a design that incorporates both types of plants in close proximity. The color of a nectar plant is not its most important feature. Bright, fragrant blossoms of any color attract butterflies. Flower shape is a critical characteristic in making the nectar available to the butterfly. Most butterflies eat by sucking nectar from flowers with a tube-like mouthpart called a proboscis. They also tend to prefer flowers that provide a platform for landing while they drink. Composites such as asters are good nectar plants. Their flat-topped flower is a perfect landing pad and the nectar is easily accessible. Moths use the same nectar plants. Hummingbirds prefer flowers that are tube-shaped and attached to the sides of stems to allow them to hover and eat.

Select plant species so that your garden has blooming plants from very early spring to late fall. Leave some leaf litter and dried perennial stocks as overwintering shelters. Tree bark is used for overwintering shelters, too.

Habitat Enhancements

Larval plants provide shelter, food and rearing needs. Nectar plants provide the adult food. There are additional enhancements and characteristics that you should plan to incorporate into your garden to be a full-service center.

- Locate your butterfly garden in the full sun but sheltered from the wind. Being out of the wind will help the butterfly conserve energy while it eats.
- Butterflies need water, salt and amino acids. They like mud puddles and pond edges. You can create a watering hole by digging a shallow depression (in a pocket of clay soil is perfect) that you water in the morning and evening. If you have cats, put wet sand in an elevated bird bath.
- Create a south facing rock pile that is out of the wind. Butterflies spend time each day basking in the sun. They will sit in the sun (on the warm rocks) with their wings spread to warm the blood and flight muscles. Again if you have a cat, protect the rock pile by putting a fence around it or putting it in an elevated bird bath.
- Shelter sites are needed to escape wind, rain and predators. Use some bunch grasses and plants of differing heights to create hiding spots.
- Butterflies during all stages are very sensitive to pesticides. Butterfly gardens must be chemical-free zones.
- Most importantly, provide a comfortable bench for up-close viewing and take the time to enjoy the wilderness in your backyard!

RESOURCES

Books: Landscaping for Wildlife in the Pacific Northwest - Russell Link
Information on Butterflies www.enchantedlearning.com
North American Butterfly Association www.naba.org

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Butterfly Habitat Essentials Checklist

Butterflies are very sensitive...
Butterfly gardens must be chemical-free zones!

You can create a garden that attracts butterflies by adding to an existing landscape or making a specialty garden. A successful butterfly garden provides food, water, shelter and places to lay eggs.

Food

Larval Host Plant

- Many butterflies lay their eggs on the leaves of larval plants which then feed the caterpillars.
- Leaves of larval plants contain chemical compounds that accumulate in the body. Some chemical compounds make it distasteful to birds. Other chemicals are essential to courtship and reproduction.
- Check larval plants for overwintering butterflies.

Nectar Plants

- Flower nectar provide adults food.
- Most butterflies eat by sucking nectar from flowers with a tube-like mouthpart called a proboscis.
- Flower shape is more important than color. Flat topped flowers provide a platform for the butterfly while eating.
- Select plants to provide blooms from early spring to late fall.

Water

Butterflies need water, salt and amino acids.
Butterflies like the shallow edges of ponds.
Make a shallow mud puddle lined with clay. Fill daily.
Provide wet sand.
Use an elevated bird bath if there are cats about.

Shelter

Shelter sites are needed to escape wind, rain and predators.
The host larval plants provide shelter and camouflage for the beginning stages of the butterfly's lifecycles.
Locate your butterfly garden in the full sun, but shelter from the wind.
Bunch grass and plants of differing heights to create hiding spots.
Leave some leaf litter and dried perennial stocks as overwintering shelters.
Tree bark also provides overwintering shelters.

Space - Arrangement of Habitat

Larval host plants should be located near nectar plants.
Build a south facing rock pile for butterflies to bask in the sun to warm the blood and flight muscles.
Put larval plants in the back border of the garden to hide holes in leaves.

Don't forget a well placed bench for up-close viewing.