

Butterfly Gardens



Come see the animals in our gardens!



They look like beautiful flower gardens, but on closer examination there's so much more going on. Butterflies flutter splashes of color. Voracious caterpillars and peaceful pupa mingle in gardens with inviting habitats.

Nectar flowers and puddles of water beckon to adult butterflies, and specific host plants feed their hungry babies. Nature-friendly gardening practices encourage the garden to flourish without poisoning its guests. A butterfly garden is more than just a pretty face.

Starting with a sunny location, a single lantana plant in a pot or in the ground becomes the simplest butterfly garden. Other nectar flowers include annual cosmos, gomphrena, impatiens, vinca, pentas, zinnias, and tithonia. Single blossoms rather than double, ruffled ones offer a better perch for feeding butterflies. For the perennial gardener, purple coneflower, butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), Joe Pye weed, verbenas (such as "Homestead Purple" or *V. bonariensis*), hardy lantana, and sedums (such as "Brilliant" or "Autumn Joy") have nectar, and some provide birdseed, too. Rising above the flower-beds, shrubs and trees offer butterflies nectar, too. Abelia, butterfly bush (*Buddleia*), chaste tree (*Vitex*), and glory bower tree (*Clerodendrum*) are some of the most popular.

Puddles or birdbaths partially filled with sand or stones create a shallow water source from which butterflies can sip dissolved minerals as well as water. To support baby butterflies (those hungry caterpillars), specific plants must be available for the female to deposit her eggs. The caterpillars emerge from the eggs and begin to devour the plant they are on. Black swallowtails lay their eggs on plants in the carrot family such as fennel, parsley, and dill. Monarchs prefer the milkweed family. Remember, plants DO recover from caterpillars feeding on them.

Garden accommodations for butterflies help replace native habitats endangered by development, pollution, and pesticides. Migratory species need food and shelter all along their route to ensure their survival, so our garden spaces provide bed and breakfast for butterflies on the go. In exchange, butterflies transform a horticultural still life into a Technicolor motion picture with movement and magic and metamorphosis.

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Suggestions for a Tidewater Virginia Butterfly Garden

In a sunny location, nectar and host plants can be grown to support both adult butterflies and their hungry caterpillar offspring:

Shrubs as Nectar Sources:

- **Abelia (*Abelia chinensis*, especially)**- Evergreen with clusters of small white or pink flowers.
- **Butterfly Bush (*Buddleia*)**- #1 Nectar plant. Blooms early summer to frost. Clusters of flowers in purple, blue, pink, white, and yellow. Prune hard in late winter.
- **Chaste Tree (*Vitex*)**- Shrub or small tree with spikes of blue, purple or white flowers.
- **Glory Bower Tree (*Clerodendrum trichotomum*)**- Shrub or small tree, Highly fragrant pinkish white flowers. Spreads.

Perennials as Nectar Sources:

1. **Butterfly Weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*)**- Bright orange blooms, interesting seed pods. Used as host plant by Monarch butterflies if common milkweed not available.
2. **Garden Phlox (*Phlox paniculata*)**- Tall mid-summer flowers. Pink most attractive to butterflies.
3. **Goldenrod (*Solidago sp.*)**- Fall nectar plants especially for Monarchs migrating south.
4. **Joe Pye Weed (*Eupatorium*)**- Tall, with pink blooms in late summer.
5. **Lantana 'Miss Huff's Hardy'**- Variety most likely to over-winter in this area. Has orange and pink blooms.
6. **Purple Coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*)**- Rosy-purple blooms throughout the summer. Do not remove dead flowers too soon as butterflies and bees continue to visit after the petals have dropped. Gold finches love the seed heads, too.
7. **Sedum 'Brilliant' or 'Autumn Joy' (*S. spectabile var.*)**- Flat clusters of summer blooms from hot pink to dusty rose.
8. **Verbena (various)**- 'Homestead Purple' most popular with butterflies. *V. bonariensis* has clusters of small, purple flowers held on rigid 3'+ stems.

Annuals as Nectar Sources:

- **Cosmos, Impatiens, Pentas, Vinca**- All colors.
- **Mexican Sunflower (*Tithonia*)**- Bright orange blooms on 3', multi-stemmed plants.
- **Zinnias**- Single forms, particularly pink, preferred by butterflies.

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Host Plants (Specific to certain butterflies)

- **Parsley**- Black Swallowtail host. (Parsley “worms” are baby butterflies!)
- **Fennel**- Green form preferred by Black Swallowtails.
- **Milkweeds**- Common, swamp, purple, Mexican, and butterfly weed attract Monarchs as both nectar and host plants. A diet of milkweed makes Monarchs unpalatable to birds.
- **Violets**- Host to fritillaries.

Host Trees and Shrubs:

- **Sassafras**- Host to Spicebush Swallowtail.
- **Paw Paw**- Zebra Swallowtail host.
- **Wild Cherry**- Tiger Swallowtail and Red-spotted Purple host.

Host vines:

- **Passion Vine (*Passiflora*)**- Host to Gulf Fritillary.
- **Wisteria**- Silver-spotted Skipper and Long-tailed Skipper host