

FROM SPRING TO FALL, the front courtyard garden at my Oregon home becomes a butterfly magnet alive with colorful motion. The garden is frequented by many species, including swallowtails, blues, painted ladies, California sisters, and my childhood 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 mention over 10,000 moth species). The best way to lure these winged wonders to your garden is by enticing them with the crea-

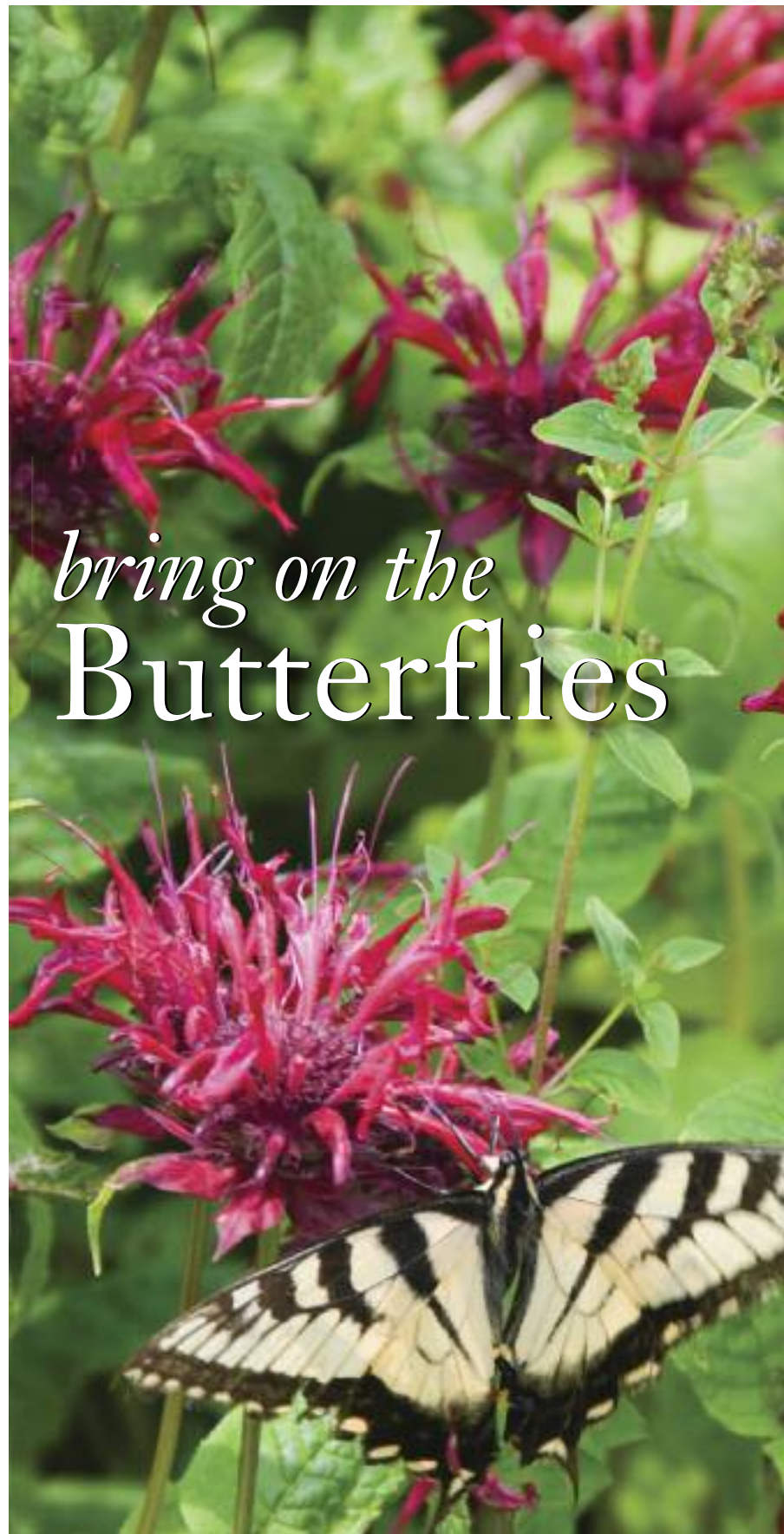
No matter where you live or what size your garden, there are many things you can do to encourage butterflies and moths to visit your garden.

BY KRIS WETHERBEE

ture comforts we all need for survival: food, water, shelter, and places where their young can grow. But even the best of garden designs can lack magnetic potential if you don't know which butterflies reside in your area or visit during migration.

Familiarizing yourself with the butterfly 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 important, 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 extension office, regional guidebooks, conservation groups in your area, and specific organizations that offer information about butterflies and other pollinators (see "Resources," page 33).



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 flowers are created equal, however, at least from a butterfly's perspective. The flower's color, shape, and fragrance will attract butterflies to varying degrees, but the quantity 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 uncoil their tubular tongues (called proboscises) 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. Regionally native plants are ideal because these are the plants the butterflies evolved

with, but many non-native nectar plants are also suitable.

Composites—plants that have daisy-like flowers—are great for the masses, providing an excellent all-around nectar source for many butterflies. Asters, cosmos, chrysanthemums, coneflowers (*Echinacea* spp.), black-eyed Susans (*Rudbeckia* spp.), sunflowers (*Helianthus* spp.), and zinnias are just a few examples

spp.), and penstemons; then wrap up with fall-blooming plants such as asters, salvias, mums, sedums, 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



Cater to butterflies of all kinds by combining plants with a variety of flower shapes, left, such as black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*), goldenrod (*Solidago canadensis*), and yarrow (*Achillea* sp.). Leaving out a plate of cut-up fruit, above, will attract butterflies that don't feed on nectar, including this owl butterfly.

few other species prefer the sap that exudes from certain trees, bird droppings, animal dung, and rotting fruit. Even nectar-loving species such as painted ladies and monarchs have been known to dip their tongues into things like overripe bananas (mashed), past-their-prime peaches, and watermelon rinds.

You can let nature do its own thing with the bird droppings and sap flows, but offering fruit in a saucer or bird feeder is easy to do. It may take a day or two for fresh fruit to reach the butterfly-attracting stage—the riper the fruit, the more appealing it is to these butterfly species.

### FEEDING CATERpillARS

With a season-long buffet of flowering plants to keep butterflies well fed, the





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 fluttering 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 nettles, and painted ladies prefer hollyhocks and thistles.

Keep in mind that 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 nibbles 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 in garden beds, can provide a place for butterflies to drink.

You can easily make any bird bath a butterfly-friendly water station by placing

small stones in one side of the saucer. Simply position them to create a series of steps or islands, making sure the tops of the stones are slightly above water level so the butterflies have a safe place to perch.

Puddles are another way to offer valuable nutrients. Mostly adult males gather around these wet spots—a behavior known as “puddling.” The nutrients strengthen the male’s sperm, encourage breeding, and improve the viability of the female’s eggs. Much like the highly concentrated nutrients in dried fruit (as opposed to fresh), they become even more



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 as 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.

#### 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 sun-

light 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 roost at night. An open shed or any nearby evergreen or broad-leaved de-



Flatish rocks in a sunny part of the garden offer butterflies a site to bask on cool days.

## Resources

### BOOKS

**Attracting Birds, Butterflies & Other Winged Wonders to Your Backyard** by Kris Wetherbee. Lark Books, New York, New York, 2004.

**Bringing Nature Home: How Native Plants Sustain Wildlife in Our Gardens** (revised edition) by Douglas W. Tallamy. Timber Press, Portland, Oregon, 2009.

**The Xerces Society Guide to Attracting Native Pollinators** by Eric Mader, Matthew Shepherd, Mace Vaughan, Scott Hoffman Black, and Gretchen LeBuhn. Storey Publishing, North Adams, Massachusetts, 2011.

### ORGANIZATIONS

**Butterflies and Moths of North America**, [www.butterfliesandmoths.org](http://www.butterfliesandmoths.org).

**The North American Butterfly Association**, [www.naba.org](http://www.naba.org).

**The Xerces Society**, [www.xerces.org](http://www.xerces.org).

ciduous 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 are likely to 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.



## 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.

Common name (Botanical name)	Height/Spread (feet)	Ornamental features	Butterflies	USDA, AHS Zones
Asters ( <i>Aster/Symphotrichum</i> spp.)	2–5/1–3	Clusters of white to purple flowers late summer to fall	bf, bl, cp, mo, pl, sk, su, wh	Zones vary
Beebalm ( <i>Monarda</i> spp.)	1–4/1–4	Annuals and perennials with aromatic foliage and summer flowers	bl, wh	Zones vary
Milkweeds ( <i>Asclepias</i> spp.)	2–6/1–3	Easy-care perennials with clusters of tubular flowers in summer	bf, bl, cp, hs, mo, pl, sk, su, st	Zones vary
*Chrysanthemums ( <i>Chrysanthemum</i> spp.)	1–4/1–3	Perennials and annuals with colorful flowers in late summer	bf, mo, sk, su, st	Zones vary
Coneflowers ( <i>Echinacea</i> spp.)	1–4/1–3	Easy-care perennials with daisylike white to purple flowers in summer	bf, pl, sk, su, st, wh	4–9, 9–1
Coreopsis, tickseeds ( <i>Coreopsis</i> spp.)	2–4/1–2	Easy-care perennials and annuals with yellow flowers in spring to summer	bf, mo, pl, sk, su	Zones vary
*Lantanas ( <i>Lantana</i> spp.)	2–8/2–6	Fast-growing annuals or warm-climate shrubs with colorful summer flowers	bf, hs, mo, sk, su, st, wh	7–12, 12–1
*Lavenders ( <i>Lavandula</i> spp.)	1–4/2–4	Drought-tolerant perennials or shrubs with spikes of white to purple summer flowers	bf, hs, pl, sk, su, st	Zones vary
*Salvias ( <i>Salvia</i> spp.)	1–5/1–3	Annuals and perennials with spikes of colorful tubular flowers in summer	bf, hs, pl, su, sk, wh, st	Zones vary
*Zinnias ( <i>Zinnia</i> spp.)	1–4/1–2	Heat-loving annuals that bloom from summer until frost	bf, mo, pl, sk, su, st, wh	9–11, 12–1

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

### 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.

Whether 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.

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



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

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