

How to Start a Butterfly Garden in Your Backyard

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Would the world be an uglier place without butterflies? Oh my goodness, yes, just look at them, they're beautiful! But beyond just ugly, a world without butterflies and other pollinators would be far less hospitable to life.

Insects that feed on nectar, like butterflies, play an essential role in the lifecycles of many of the plants that humans and other animals depend on for food. Without them, those plants would be in trouble, and so would we.

That's why the Student Conservation Association works to protect pollinators from the many threats that are causing their populations to drop, including habitat loss. Looking for a way to help? By building a simple butterfly garden, you'll help preserve the essential habitat that butterflies and other pollinators need to survive and, bonus, bring more butterflies to your yard! It's a fun and easy way to truly make a difference for the planet while enjoying some time in the great outdoors.

Create Your Own Butterfly Garden!

1 Picking the Perfect Location

When determining a location for your butterfly garden, sunlight is the key. Most native plants that attract butterflies will require full sun for at least half of the day. When considering a location, you also want to look at the quality of the soil. If your soil is acidic, rocky, or mostly clay, you may want to consider adding compost or buying nutrient rich topsoil.

2 Choosing the Right Plants

Choosing the right plants requires a bit of research as it's very important to use plants that grow naturally in your region. Not only are native butterflies more likely to be attracted to a garden filled with the native plants they are familiar with, but in some cases non-native plants can actually be harmful to butterflies and other pollinators. A fun way to begin is by scouting around your neighborhood to see what plants and butterflies are already there. Once you have some ideas, complete your research by downloading a list of pollinator-friendly native plants in your region, and head to a nursery that's knowledgeable about local plants and wildflowers.

3 Host Plants

Two types of plants that butterflies need are host plants and nectar plants. Host plants, where butterflies lay their eggs, are vital to the butterfly lifecycle and will encourage butterflies to linger and explore. Common examples of host plants are milkweed (make sure it's native and not tropical!) for monarch butterflies and their caterpillars, and parsley, for black swallowtails and their caterpillars.

4 Nectar Plants

Nectar plants are the flowers that adult butterflies feed on. Common native wildflowers like Aster, Echinacea, and Black-eyed Susan are a great source of nectar for butterflies. Be sure to pick a few flowers that bloom throughout the spring and summer to provide nectar throughout the season. Plant nursery staff are generally an excellent source of knowledge on the blooming cycles of local wildflowers. One thing to be sure and AVOID is the butterfly bush! While this plant is famous for attracting butterflies, it lacks nutritional value and is actually addictive, preventing butterflies from feeding on healthy plants.

5 Plant Orientation

When you plant your flowers, be sure to clump them by species and color. This makes the colors easier to see and butterflies will be more likely to utilize them. Primarily, butterflies are attracted to red, orange, yellow, and purple flowers.

6 Butterflies Need More Than Plants!

Providing a few flat rocks for sunning and some cool, shady spots for resting will help butterflies regulate their temperature. If an area is particularly windy, you can use larger shrubs as a windbreak. While not completely necessary to include, some butterfly gardens have bird baths or other water features that allow butterflies to "puddle" and obtain hydration and mineral nutrients. Birdbaths and benches also provide a sturdy, sheltered place for caterpillars to pupate.

7 Maintenance

Thankfully, native plants do not require much maintenance, but you can weed, trim, and water as you see necessary. Do NOT use pesticides or insecticides in your garden! Doing so will kill the butterflies you've worked so hard to attract. If you include many species of native plant in your garden, you will see fewer pests and, bonus, more butterflies. Don't worry about lightly-chewed leaves, as they're usually a sign of an active, healthy butterfly garden.