More Information on Attracting Butterflies to Your Landscape

Distribute 03-03-2016

Last week we listed plants that would provide 12 months of nectar for butterflies and also some of the most important plants for providing egg-laying and caterpillar feeding sites. Both sets of plants are important. Some such as milkweed, esperanza, and citrus provide both egg-laying sites and nectar-producing blooms.

There are some special water and food providing activities that will complement your butterfly plantings. In addition it is important that you have insecticide use practices that protect plants but don’t unnecessarily reduce butterfly and caterpillar populations.

Water – Butterflies require water just like birds and other animals so expect them to frequent bird baths and other water features, especially at the shallow edges.

Puddling – This activity helps meet the butterflies need for moisture but it also is an important source of minerals and other nutrients. Place sand and mud in a shallow dish such as a container tray and place it in the sun. Several species will visit the artificial puddle. Mix some manure into the stew and the puddle will become even more popular.

Sugar water – Anyone who has hummingbird feeders notices that butterflies are attracted to the sugar water mix. Pour some into a shallow dish like described for puddling and you will attract more butterflies.

Fruit mashes – Just like birds, butterflies are attracted to many types of fruit. It works best if it is over-ripe. Mash up that fruit in a shallow dish and even let it ferment or rot and it becomes more attractive as a food source for some butterflies.

How to use Pesticides and Still Have Butterflies in your Landscape. It is easiest to maximize butterfly numbers in your landscape by discontinuing your use of insecticides. In most cases however such an action is not possible, and it is also not necessary. It is important to discontinue general applications of insecticides but targeted applications with insecticides can occur if toxicity, timing, extent of application and period of toxicity are controlled.

Always know what the target insect is and limit spraying to what is required to protect specific plants, flowers or vegetables. It may be relatively easy to apply a Bt product to protect your broccoli from cabbage loopers or use a granule to control grubs in the lawn but it will be tougher to spray multiple pecan trees for webworms. It may also be difficult to apply a general mosquito spray. In that case timing and toxicity of the spray would be very important.

Another important principle to accept in the quest to maximize butterfly populations is to be willing to accept a certain amount of insect damage.

We aren’t attempting to maximize income or even production from our backyard garden and landscape. We can tolerate some interesting caterpillars (giant swallowtails) that look like bird droppings on our citrus, or a temporarily stripped passion vine from gulf fritillary caterpillars without suffering income loss or denying our families food on the table.