

All-Star Butterfly Plants for the Summer

Distribute 04-26-2018

Many plants will provide nectar for butterflies but for the summer time in the San Antonio area I have identified the 4 plants that I think are the All-Star picks for attracting butterflies to the landscape. They are zinnias, tropical milkweed, Gregg's mistflower, and porter weed. Include these All Stars in your summer landscape for their landscape appeal and interesting characteristics in addition to their status as popular butterfly nectar source.

I seem to be bucking the trend on zinnias. The trend at area nurseries is to feature the smaller more uniform versions. My favorites, however, are the old-fashioned tall selections that grow to 3 feet tall like California Giants and Cactus. They are showier in the garden, make better long-stemmed cut flowers and are more attractive to butterflies as a nectar source. You can easily grow the larger selections from seed but if you prefer transplants, look for the Dreamland variety. They don't grow to 3 feet but reach 2 feet and have full rounded blooms in red, yellow, pink, orange, white and violet. The butterflies and even the hummingbirds like the Dreamland as a nectar source. If you let the Dreamland hybrids mature to the point they reseed they will produce a mix of parent plants that are especially popular as nectar producers.

For most impact plant a massed bed or several beds of zinnias. In my experience an 8 ft. by 24 ft. bed of zinnias attracts an amazing mix of butterflies and more varieties and more individual butterflies than a similar sized planting of other nectar sources. Let them reseed themselves all summer.

The debate continues about whether it is desirable to plant tropical milkweed. In the meantime, the Monarchs and Queens make it the first-choice location to lay their eggs in SA landscapes. In addition, they and other species of Central Texas butterflies, utilize the showy flowers as a favorite nectar source.

The tropical milkweed, *Asclepias curassavica*, is an attractive plant with yellow and orange blooms on a 3-4-foot plant. It is easily the showiest milkweed. It has also proven to be easier to produce at nurseries than the native varieties. Among the other issues are that tropical milkweed continues blooming and retains its foliage into the winter if the weather is mild. Some naturalists worry that the availability of the nectar in the fall may encourage the Monarchs to hang out too long in Central Texas instead of flying south to their wintering ground in Mexico. There is also some worry that the longer growing period means that tropical milkweed will accumulate high levels of detrimental micro-organisms.

Research on the topics described continues. In the meantime, gardeners are encouraged to grow as many native milkweeds as possible and supplement the plantings with tropical milkweed. Pending the production of definitive research results, hedge your use of the favorite nectar and egg-laying tropical milkweeds by pruning them to the ground in October when the Monarchs should head south.

The third All-Star is Gregg's mistflower. The plant is native to West Texas. It tolerates poor caliche soil. In fact, it may be best to grow it in poor soil with limited fertility to slow down its inclination to spread in all directions from its original planting site. Mist flower is not a disciplined grower. Typically the plant grows to a cushiony 3 feet tall coated with a blanket of light blue nectar rich blooms. The blooms

become covered with butterflies through the summer and fall. In the winter it freezes back to the roots to emerge in time for an end of April beginning bloom period the next spring.

Porter weed is the 4th All-Star for the summer. It qualifies as the “weirdest” of the All-Stars because of its growth and blooming pattern. There are two versions of the porter weed on the market. The full-size grows to 3 feet tall and has purple flowers. The dwarf version is 2 feet tall with red flowers. Both versions grow in a weeping configuration. The weirdness comes into play because the bloom stalks are among the weeping stems and the active bloom is only about 1 inch along the stem at any one time. The bloom is intensely colored and migrates up the stem as the summer progresses. During the summer there is a serious competition between butterflies and even hummingbirds for access to the flowers. The theory is that the porter weed nectar is exceptionally potent.