

Gardening for Butterflies

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We will not see many Monarch Butterflies again until late fall when they migrate through San Antonio going back to their wintering ground near Mexico City. In the meantime, however if we manage our landscape towards that end, we can enjoy the presence of many other species of butterflies and even encourage their reproduction.

The three keys to making your landscape a center of butterfly activity are offering 12 months of nectar blooms; growing the species of plants required for the various species' breeding; and managing the gardens appropriately in terms of pesticide usage.

At this time of the year the most sought-after flowers for nectar are mistflower and zinnia. They produce nectar from May 1 through the end of November most years. Dedicate a generous amount of garden space to them during that period and you will have many butterfly species and individuals visiting your property. Other plants to grow during the summer include milkweed, porter weed, lantana, cosmos, sunflower, and salvia. For the late fall also grow some duranta, mint marigold, Mexican flame vine, and fall aster.

To meet the winter part of your nectar supply calendar, grow alyssum, calendula, dianthus, and stocks. Several of the wildflowers are excellent nectar sources in the early spring. My favorite is blue curl (Phacelia). The plant grows in sun or shade and is attractive to pollinators including butterflies in the months before zinnias and mistflower are available. Naturalize it along with larkspur and verbena.

Twelve months of nectar producing plants will bring butterflies in for you to observe, the next piece of the butterfly attraction effort is to provide the plants on which butterflies will lay their eggs. We are familiar with the requirement that milkweed must be available in the spring if Monarchs are going to lay eggs and produce caterpillars. The Monarchs migrate north after a spring visit and through the summer the closely related Queen butterflies will lay their eggs on the available milkweed. For an egg-laying site for Giant Swallowtails a gardener needs to offer citrus trees. Gulf Fritillaries do their breeding on passion vine. If you grow dill, fennel, or parsley, expect the herbs to produce a crop of Black Swallowtails.

The "Gold Star" Esperanza is one of the best plants for blooms in the hot San Antonio summer, and it is also the egg-laying preference of the gray hair-streak butterfly. Grow cannas if you want Brazilian Skippers to lay eggs and raise caterpillars. The Bordered Patch butterfly is attracted to sunflowers as an egg-laying site. Other favorite caterpillar food plants include flame acanthus for the Janais Patch and Texas Crescent Spot butterflies, cudweed for the American Painted Lady butterfly; and Ruellia species for Buckeye butterflies.

The third factor to increase butterfly numbers in the landscape is to adopt a reasonable insecticide policy. Here are some issues to consider.

- It is possible to eliminate all insecticide use but that is tough to do if you have a large garden. It is also not necessary.
- Instead, be prepared to tolerate some level of damage or “sharing” of plantings with insects, especially caterpillars.
- Another key is to limit insecticidal spraying to a specific target such as stink bugs on your peaches or cabbage loopers on your broccoli. Avoid widespread sprays that use general insecticides.
- Applications such as a landscape wide mosquito spray can be tough on the butterfly and caterpillar populations, but sometimes difficult decisions must be made. The good news is that there have been developments in mosquito controls that address the disease carrying pests but do less damage to other insects. Seek them out.
- Granular applications may be more controlled and have less accidental caterpillar or butterfly kill than sprays.
- Use insecticides with limited kill impact and a short-term potency, it is also important to remember that organic and manufactured insecticides can both kill butterflies.

For more information and activities on gardening for butterflies there are many resources on the internet and in the library. My favorite source of on the topic is the book” Butterfly Gardening for the South” by Geyata Ajilvsgi.