



## Attracting Butterflies to Your Garden

by Jill Weisenberger, UC Master Gardener

On a warm October afternoon, I was enjoying the view from our patio when a Monarch Butterfly floated through the yard. The butterfly silently moved from south to north, then moments later repeated its travel in the opposite direction. Finally, it landed on a shrub aptly named butterfly bush (Buddleia). After observing the antics of this butterfly, I decided to make sure I had a yard that would provide food and protection for these bejeweled creatures. Here are some general tips on how to create an appealing area and a safe haven for butterflies.



Butterflies on a butterfly bush

**Grow brightly colored plants in a sunny place.** In addition to the color palette we receive when planting flowers in our landscape, a delightful reward is had when a beautiful, iridescent butterfly visits our space. By choosing plants butterflies prefer and putting them in sunny places, we have the opportunity to see them land on a flower to sip the sweet nectar provided by that plant. In early spring, the following drought tolerant plants attract butterflies: yellow bush sunflower, red buckwheat, and purple coyote mint (a native). Drought tolerant ground covers that attract butterflies include Bearberry and Rockrose, available in many colors, from pink to rose to purple. Blanket Flower (*Gaillardia*) is a “plant and ignore” kind of perennial that attracts sulphurs, whites and swallowtail butterflies.

**Grow plants that have blooms rich in nectar.** There is a reason the buddleia’s common name is butterfly bush. In the summer, its beautiful fragrant flowers of blue, purple or white are usually covered with butterflies. In spring, you may choose water wise lilacs, which need occasional watering once established, or common yarrow (a native), both of which come in a variety of colors. For purple flowers, try Mexican heather which requires a little more water, or drought tolerant lavenders and coneflowers. A few possibilities for this area during the summer include yellow coreopsis, daisies, marigolds, and blue mist bluebeard, a shrub that has blue flowers in late summer.



Painted lady on asters

**Plants that prefer light shade, need little water and attract butterflies** are monkey flowers (a native) and Shasta daisies. Select late bloomers like asters and chrysanthemums to extend your viewing time. Painted Ladies (a type of butterfly) feed on cosmos, hollyhock and Apricot Mallow. And don’t forget butterfly weed (*Asclepias*), which is both a food source for the monarch and a host plant that provides food for their caterpillars. Butterfly weed also attracts many other butterflies and skippers. You can use resources like Master Gardeners’ plant lists and the [Sunset Western Garden Book](#) to investigate more choices.

**Grow plants in a variety of sizes and colors.** Some butterflies desire a variety of species. They are attracted to red, orange, yellow and purple. If you create large swaths of color, it will be easier for the butterflies to find your garden.

**Provide places of protection**, especially from wind. Protection may come in the form of butterfly houses, which are similar to birdhouses. However, their openings are slotted rather than round. These can be purchased through gardening supply catalogs or online.

**Provide some mud puddles** so that butterflies may sip from them to supplant their diet with salts and minerals naturally found in the soil. If you place flat rocks in a sunny location, you may observe butterflies warming themselves in the morning and resting.



Black swallowtail on zinnia

There are many natural predators that prey on butterflies. Animals such as birds, spiders and lizards are a few enemies of butterflies. Insecticides that kill pests will also kill your butterflies. If you feel the need to reduce the pests in your garden, using insecticidal soap, hand picking pests off the plants or using beneficial insects will provide a safer habitat for butterflies. Integrated Pest Management information found at: <http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu> offers details on these methods.

Providing food for the larval stage of the butterfly is important. Butterflies have a life cycle that includes four stages: egg, larva, pupa and adult. The female selects a plant upon which she lays an egg. The caterpillar emerges to chew and chomp through the host plant and eventually the larva changes into a pupa or chrysalis. What was once a worm-like creature emerges from the pupa case as a winged, colorful and lovely insect that seemingly drifts through the air. However, butterflies do not travel aimlessly. They have targets: their food supply. The proboscis is the long, coiled tongue of the butterfly. This organ is used for lapping up nectar. Because of this, butterflies need flowers shaped in such a way that the nectar they need is easily obtained. These winged darlings of the garden do not bite, sting, chase or harm anything. They are wonderful pollinators that flit from bloom to bloom.

Find a butterfly that you want to attract. Field guides may help you identify the many species of butterflies that inhabit our landscapes through the warm weather months. Visit the information booths at one of the Master Gardener Garden Festivals in your area to get a wealth of information on this topic.

If you provide the correct food, shelter and a safe place for them, you will not have to travel far to be a butterfly watcher.

March 5, 2015