

Creating a Butterfly Garden

The key to attracting butterflies is to see a garden through their eyes, not through yours. While their bright colors and dancing movements may attract us to their presence, the elements that provide for a full life attract them to our gardens. The more elements you provide, the more species you'll attract. But even a container on the balcony of an apartment can still encourage butterfly visitors by offering a necessity or two.

What are these elements? Food is primary. Large offerings of nectar-rich blooms will attract numerous butterflies. A mix of annuals and perennials with different bloom times will ensure an extended period of food sources from Spring through Autumn. Flowers with flat blooms or bloom clusters are best. These provide a flat landing pad for easy dining.



Rudbeckia spp.

Coneflowers (Echinacea), Black Eyed Susan (Rudbeckia spp.), and Yarrow are stalwarts. Blanket Flower (Gaillardia spp.), the state wildflower of Oklahoma, is also an excellent choice. In containers, Lantana and Pentas (especially the red variety) are magnets for butterflies. The smaller blooms of thyme and oregano draw the smaller Spring Azure and Eastern Tailed Blue, no bigger than your thumbnail. For more extensive nectar plant lists, see the sources below.

Planting flowers in groups by color will guide butterflies more quickly to nectar since their vision is not as refined as ours. A cautionary note - some hybrid flowers bred for specific color or size may be sterile and not produce any nectar. Butterflies know the difference. While not as refined as human vision, butterflies can see into the ultraviolet (UV) range. Flowers have evolved over the centuries to guide pollinators to their nectar using UV light to their advantage. Butterflies literally see flowers in a different light than we humans.



UV light, left; human sight, right

An additional element that will attract butterflies is to offer larval (caterpillar) host plants. Caterpillars of different species feed exclusively on particular plants. Having these plants available will not only draw butterflies in to lay their eggs, but will allow you to watch the development of the caterpillars. Caterpillars of the Black Swallowtail, the state butterfly of

Oklahoma, feed on parsley, dill, and fennel. If you garden with these, plant enough for both you and the caterpillars. Monarch caterpillars feed exclusively on milkweed (Asclepias spp.). With almost 20 different species of milkweed native to Oklahoma, you're sure to find some that fit your garden area. Not all milkweed are aggressive spreaders. Butterfly weed (A. tuberosa) and Green Antelope Horn (A. viridis) are two good ones. Monarch populations continue to decline,



monarch caterpillar on milkweed

so many groups are working tirelessly to support the survival of this species.

A final word . . . insecticides. Avoid them entirely if possible. Use only sparingly, if you must. Insecticides are indiscriminate, killing beneficial insects as well as pests. Lingering residue will poison both butterflies and caterpillars as they feed.

Butterfly gardening will reward you with hours of growing interest and wonder. Dig in and begin!

[Landscaping to Attract Butterflies, Moths, and Skippers](#) (OSU fact sheet HLA-6430)

[All About Butterflies--University of Kentucky College of Agriculture, Food and Environment](#)

[Monarch Watch--Butterfly Gardening \(University of Kansas\)](#)

[Blind Butterflies-Ask a Biologist, Arizona State University](#)

[Attracting Butterflies to the Garden--Colorado State University Extension](#)