

Attracting and Producing Butterflies in your Landscape

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The Monarchs are back in the San Antonio area. If they can find milkweed plants on which to lay their eggs, the new generation will continue the migration north.

Butterflies are a desirable addition to our landscapes. They are colorful and interesting. In South and Central Texas we have a large number of butterfly species to enjoy. The Monarchs are only here through May and then again in the fall on their way south, but some species are active all 12 months of the year. As adults, butterflies feed by collecting nectar from blooming plants. The most obvious way to increase the variety and number of butterflies that visit your landscape is to offer nectar producing blooms 12 months of the year.

Here is a list of plants by calendar quarter that will produce blooms to meet the needs of butterflies all year around. The list is not all inclusive, there are many other blooms that provide nectar.

For May through July have zinnias, mistflower, milkweed, pentas, pavonia, cosmos, and plumbago growing in your yard. Most of these plants will continue blooming into the fall but also add sunflower, porter weed, duranta, the summer Salvias, lantanas and esperanza. For late fall and into the winter add coneflower, mint marigold, fall aster, calendula, dianthus, and alyssum. For late winter and early spring grow *Salvia greggii*, horse herb, phlox, verbena, coreopsis and blue curl (*Phacelia*)

In addition to blooming plants to provide nectar for the butterflies, a landscape that offers some key caterpillar food plants will reward the gardener with interesting reproduction activities and more butterflies to observe.

For Monarchs and Queen butterflies include one or more species of milkweed (*Asclepias*). The tropical milkweed has attractive orange or yellow flowers and is the easiest transplant to find, but there are several native milkweeds that are desirable. Plant native milkweeds if they are available, otherwise plant the tropical species. Milkweed has chemicals in the foliage that are taken in by the butterflies to produce a bitter taste and are important to discouraging predators. The most common native milkweed, called "butterfly weed," *Asclepias tuberosa*, grows to 18 inches tall with attractive yellow blooms.

If you have citrus growing in your landscape you will probably have Giant Swallowtails lay their eggs on the plants. The caterpillars look like bird droppings!

Plant dill, fennel, and or parsley and expect Black Swallowtails to find the plants for egg-laying, even if the plants are growing in containers.

Passion vine is a vigorous plant that produces showy blooms in several color choices. They are also known for being the favorite egg-laying site of Gulf Fritillary butterflies. It is not unusual for the feeding caterpillars to strip the vine nearly bare of foliage and leave the blooms on bare stems.

The “Gold Star” selection of Texas yellow bells rates as one of the best hot weather blooming plants in our area. It is very attractive and drought tolerant. Texas yellow bells also are a favorite egg-laying site of the Gray Hair-Streak butterfly.

Other favorite caterpillar food plants include flame acanthus for Janais Patch and Texas Crescent Spot butterflies; cudweed for the American Painted Lady butterfly; Ruellia species for Buckeye butterflies, and cannas for Brazilian Skippers.

The third factor in increasing butterfly numbers in your landscape is to adopt a reasonable insecticide policy.

- You can eliminate all insecticide use but that is tough to do if you have a large garden, and it is not necessary.
- Be prepared to tolerate some level of damage or “sharing” of your plantings with insects, especially caterpillars.
- One key is to limit insecticidal spraying to a specific target such as stink bugs on your peaches or cabbage loopers on your broccoli. It is desirable to avoid widespread sprays that use general insecticides. Applications such as a landscape- wide mosquito spray or an application to all of your tall pecans can be tough on the butterfly and caterpillar populations but sometimes difficult choices must be made.
- Use insecticides with limited killing impact (to targeted pests) and a short-term potency. It is important to remember that organic and manufactured insecticides can both kill butterflies.

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

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