Attracting Butterflies to San Antonio Landscapes

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South Texas is blessed with a large number of butterfly species. With our mild climate we can expect to see butterflies every month of the year. Nectar producing blooms; caterpillar eating plants; a benevolent pesticide program; and special water and food offerings all will help maximize the number of butterflies that visit and/or reproduce in your landscape. Arguably the most important factor in attracting butterflies to our landscapes is to provide nectar producing blooms 12 months of the year. There is a large palette of plants from which to choose. Here is one mix of plants that will produce blooms and butterfly attracting nectar 12 months of the year.

Month Plants

January Calendula, Pansies

February Alyssum, Primula

March Verbena, Coreopsis,

April Salvia greggii,” Texas Gold” columbine

May Passion vine, Fanick’s phlox

June Zinnia, Plumbago

July Sunflower, Vinca

August Milkweed, Pavonia, Cosmos

September Purple coneflower, Vitex, Penta

October Blue mistflower, Lantana

November Fall aster, Mint marigold, Mealy blue sage

December Stocks, Dianthus

In addition to nectar plants to provide nectar for the butterflies year-round, a landscape that offers some key caterpillar food plants will reward the gardener with interesting reproduction activities and more individual 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. Milkweed has chemicals in the foliage that are taken in by the butterflies to produce a bitter taste and are important to discouraging predators. It is ironic that the most common native milkweed, called “butterfly weed,” Asclepias tuberosa, is the least chemically potent egg-laying site.

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 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 an aggressive 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.

Next week we will discuss a pesticide policy for your landscape that will protect your plants but also maximize butterfly numbers. We will also offer some water-providing and feeding activities that contribute to butterfly numbers.