

Blooms in the Fall that Will Attract Butterflies, Hummingbirds and other Pollinators

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There is a lot of butterfly, hummingbird, and other pollinator traffic in the autumn. Your landscape can be an important part of the action if you have some of the plants being sought out.

Hummingbirds migrate in the fall. If you have sugar water feeders and nectar sources you can expect an everchanging group of black-chinned, ruby-throated and rufous hummingbirds to interact and compete for the available nectar sources. In the garden Mexican honeysuckle, cape honeysuckle, zinnias, porterweed, four o'clock, salvia, lantana, shrimp plant, Turk's cap and esperanza will be visited by the migrants.

For especially close observation of the competing migrants, include some firebush in full bloom in a container on a sunny patio. Large plants in full bloom are available at area nurseries for just such a purpose. Rufous hummingbirds are the smallest of the migrating species but when it comes to taking possession of firebush, they are usually the most aggressive. There are some varieties of firebush available at the nursery that don't produce much bloom, so only select the specimens in full bloom, if it is the migrating hummingbirds you want to attract. The plants are root hardy so they can be left in a container permanently, or they can be transplanted to the garden later in the fall.

If your patio includes shady areas, pentas can replace the firebush. Pentas are not winter hardy so if you do not have a greenhouse-like shelter to protect them from the cold, you will have to purchase new plants next spring. Pentas are available in red, white, pink, and lavender colored blooms.

Queen, Gulf Fritillary, Black Swallowtail, Giant Swallowtail, Sulfur, Red Admiral, American Beauty and other species of butterflies are flying right now in area landscapes. They are seeking nectar from plants such as mistflower, milkweed, zinnia, lantana, salvia, and porterweed, Soon the migrating Monarchs will arrive on their way to the wintering grounds in forests near Mexico City.

Milkweeds are a favorite nectar plant for most butterfly species and are the only plant species on which Monarchs will lay their eggs. The potent chemicals contained in the milkweed foliage is transferred to the feeding caterpillars and makes them and the adults less desirable to potential predators. In the spring the migrating Monarchs will often lay eggs on our local milkweeds. In the fall it is most likely that the migrating Monarchs will use the plants in our landscapes for nectar to nourish them to finish the trip south. The caterpillars hatching on milkweed in San Antonio landscapes in the fall are usually those of the Queen butterfly, a Monarch cousin. The caterpillars of the two species look similar except that the Queen caterpillar has 3 antennae like appendages spaced along the body, and the Monarch only has two appendages, one at each end of its body.

Other showy fall blooming plants that are sought out by Monarchs and other butterflies are mint marigold, fall aster, duranta, and Mexican flame vine. Quite often the hanging purple flowers on the duranta will be completely covered by queen and Monarch butterflies in the fall.

Porterweed is a favorite nectar source of butterflies, hummingbirds, and bees. The plant is deceptive with small red or purple blooms that move up the weeping stems but because the nectar is so potent bumble bees, butterflies and even hummingbirds will compete with each other for a place on the flower.