

Plants to Attract Hummingbirds and Butterflies in the Fall

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Based on the testimony of other gardeners and the number of hummingbirds in my landscape right now, it has been a great spring for hummingbirds. Your sugar water feeders will help keep them fed this fall but there are also some plants that are especially good nectar sources. All the plants described are available at area nurseries and will provide some blooms this fall.

Zinnias are favorite nectar sources for hummingbirds and butterflies. Let some of the flowers in your current bed of zinnias reseed to provide flowers for the fall or go ahead and start some new plants by seed. I find California Giants to be the most popular nectar source. They are also an excellent source of cut flowers. Dreamland is the attractive transplant available at area nurseries.

Mexican honeysuckle has an orange tubular (honeysuckle shaped) bloom but it is not a vine like most honeysuckles. The nectar-producing plant makes a large dense mound (6ft tall and 8ft in diameter). In addition to producing an attractive plant loaded with orange blooms, Mexican honeysuckle is drought tolerant and not eaten by the deer. It grows well in full sun or partial shade.

Cape honeysuckle flowers and leaves look like they are from a miniature trumpet creeper. The plant is called a vine, but it produces fast growing upright shoots that lean on support rather than attach themselves to it. Cape honeysuckle begins blooming in July or August and blooms until the cold weather arrives about Thanksgiving. It is a favorite nectar source of the migrating hummingbirds that come through San Antonio. Cape honeysuckle freezes back to the ground every winter which is probably good because it would take over our backyards otherwise, but it means we must prune back the frozen stems every spring.

Duranta has purple-blue blooms that are snail shaped. There is also a white-flowered version. It is a woody shrub that grows 8 feet tall and 8 feet in diameter with a slight weeping shape. Some winters it freezes back to the ground but not as readily as esperanza. When the duranta is in full bloom in the fall, it is a favorite nectar source for monarchs, queens, and gulf fritillaries along with the hummingbirds.

I have discussed porterweed in previous columns as one of the top nectar sources for butterflies. The hummingbirds also love it, in fact, porterweed is one of the few plants where you will see hummingbirds and butterflies (quite often giant swallowtails) actively competing for a spot on one of the small but potent blooms. Porterweed is a tropical plant which usually does not return from the winter, but it is worth having some in your autumn landscape because of its appearance and popularity as a nectar source.

There are many sizes and flower colors of porterweed to select from. The red-flowered dwarf and blue-colored full-sized plant are my favorites but there are porterweed with pink, coral, and various shades of purple flowers as well. All have a basic weeping shape with small blooms that move up the stems.

To bring the hummingbirds on the patio this summer and fall obtain a firebush. Planted in a 3-5-gallon container it will make a disciplined 2.5 ft globe-shaped plant offering small red tubular blooms for the summer hummingbirds and fall migrating hummingbirds to compete for. Stay alert if you grow a firebush in a container on your patio, the dogfighting birds will be whizzing around in all directions.

Firebush needs full sun to grow well. If your patio is shady, use pentas to bring in the hummingbirds for observation. The flowers are available in red, pink, lavender and white. The penta will be in full bloom when you purchase them, and they will stay in bloom until cold weather arrives after Thanksgiving.