

Friday's Feature

By

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Creating a butterfly garden

Butterflies provide unequalled splendor. Our fascination with these beautiful creatures is as evident today as it has been through time.

Throughout history, butterflies have been valued symbols in many cultures. They have been found in many paintings, including 1,500-year-old Aztec art and 4,000-year-old Egyptian frescos.

While once abundant, butterfly sightings are decreasing due to loss of habitat. A growing number of gardeners, however, are now attracting butterflies to their yards by creating unique butterfly habitats in order to improve butterfly survival.

A butterfly garden may be a few containers of butterfly-attracting plants or a sizable garden with many different plants. To create a "butterfly friendly" environment, there are a few simple requirements: food, water, shelter and a place to reproduce.

To plant a butterfly garden properly, you need to have a general understanding of their life cycle. Their metamorphosis includes four distinct stages – the egg, caterpillar (larvae), chrysalis (pupae) and butterfly (adult).

While they may look very different at each stage, it is important to understand that a caterpillar is not a different creature – it is simply a baby butterfly (or moth).

Butterfly caterpillars feed hungrily on the leaves of plants. Each type of butterfly caterpillar will feed specifically only on certain plants, and the adult female butterfly will lay her eggs only on those plants that will properly nourish her offspring.

For example, Monarch butterfly caterpillars will feed only on milkweed plants (*Asclepias*). Gulf fritillary caterpillars prefer species of passion vines (*Passiflora*). The parsley worm, which grows up to be the Eastern black swallowtail, feeds on parsley, dill and fennel. Sulphur butterflies lay their eggs on cassias, and the preferred food of long-tailed skipper larvae is bean leaves. The orange dog caterpillar, which feeds on citrus trees and disguises itself to look like bird droppings, grows up to be the spectacular giant swallowtail

butterfly.

These plants, called host plants, are planted into a butterfly garden with the hope that butterflies will lay eggs on them and they will be consumed by caterpillars. This is one of the few situations where a gardener actually hopes a plant will be eaten by caterpillars.

Needless to say, the use of pesticides is not recommended in butterfly gardens.

But remember that caterpillars are picky about what plants they will feed on, so they generally will feed only on the larval food plants you provide for them. That means you really do not need to be concerned they will attack and damage other types of plants in your landscape.

As for adult butterflies, they feed primarily on nectar from flowers. Many commonly grown garden flowers are attractive to butterflies, and the more kinds of flowers you include in your garden the better your chances of attracting butterflies.

Certain nectar plants seem to be especially irresistible to butterflies. Some of the best are butterfly weed (*Asclepias curassavica*), butterfly bush (*Buddleia* species), pentas, salvias and zinnias.

In addition to plants, other features are helpful in attracting butterflies. Butterflies cannot drink from open water, so a shallow pan filled with pebbles can be placed in the garden to be filled with water whenever you irrigate or it rains.

Basking spots also are important. As insects, butterflies are cold-blooded and depend on the warmth of the sun for energy to maintain proper body temperature. Locate your butterfly garden in an area that receives the morning sun and warms up early.

Don't forget to include your children, grandchildren or others in the process. Kids are delighted by the changing stages in a butterfly's life cycle, and it is a great way for them to learn more about nature.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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