



Johnson's Garden Talk

Lawn and garden information for the friends and customers of Johnson's Garden Centers

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June 2004



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A Butterfly Invitation

Mike Hargrove, Johnson's Ridge Rd. Greenhouse Manager

Attracting butterflies to your yard and garden is a natural for any gardener. You do not need an established, mature garden to attract butterflies. You can get started in a new yard or you can add annuals and perennials to an established landscape to lure more butterflies. An added benefit is that most of the nectar producing plants that butterflies are looking for are also some of the most colorful for the garden. Butterflies require shelter, sunny flight paths, moisture, nectar plants and "host" plants.

Shelter from wind and predators can be provided with trees and shrubs or fences and walls to block the wind. Try to keep bird baths, bird feeders and bird houses away from your butterfly habitat.

Sunny flight paths can be open areas of lawn that warm up during the day (butterflies don't take wing until the temperature is around 55° or 60°). Provide some large flat rocks for sunning areas.

Moisture should be provided with shallow depressions in rocks, moist sand or shallow mud puddles for "puddling." Male butterflies congregate around mud puddles for moisture and minerals. Butterflies drink from drops of water on leaves or rocks.

Nectar is a butterfly's main source of food. Composite flowers (daisy-type) are the most attractive as they provide a ready-made landing site for butterflies. The best colors to use are red, purple, yellow and orange. Some of the favorite annuals are lantana, ageratum, verbena, cosmos, zinnia and pentas. Perennials to plant are milkweed asclepias, coneflowers, monarda, sedums, veronica, buddleia, coreopsis and phlox. Besides nectar, some butterflies are attracted to rotting fruit like melons or bananas. (Something to do with that leftover watermelon rind and banana peel!)

Host plants must be provided for females to lay eggs on and the larvae to feed on while growing. If you are providing host plants for butterflies, do not use pesticides on or near these plants. Pesticides kill butterflies and other beneficial insects. Different butterflies use different host plants. Monarchs lay eggs only on milkweed plants; black swallowtails use herbs like parsley, dill and fennel. Once the eggs are laid, they hatch in three to six days. The caterpillars then eat on the host plants for three to four weeks before going into the chrysalis stage. It will be another nine to fourteen days before they emerge as an adult. A large number of butterflies use trees and shrubs as host plants such as willows, magnolias, chokecherry, cottonwood and elm. Other annual and perennial host plants include violets, hollyhocks, clover, peas, asters and snapdragons.

It can be challenging to identify all the butterflies that come to such a garden. Some of my frequent summer visitors are skippers, painted ladies, admirals, swallowtails, viceroys, sulphurs, question marks and everyone's favorite—the monarchs.

By knowing how to provide what they need, and with only minimum effort on your part, butterflies can become a varied and fascinating addition to your garden from April through September. ■