

# Butterfly Gardening in Wisconsin

## *Southern Wisconsin Butterfly Association*

Butterfly gardening adds beauty to your yard and provides habitat for butterflies. Much critical butterfly habitat has been lost, so any butterfly-friendly terrain we provide as gardeners can help many species survive. Once butterflies appear in your yard, it's great fun to learn to identify them, take photographs, and observe behavior.

Butterfly gardening is easy to do; you need to follow a few simple guidelines: choose a sunny location, plant both caterpillar food plants and species that provide nectar for butterflies, avoid using pesticides and herbicides, remember not to throw away plant debris (chrysalises may be on those dead plants), provide shelter (shrubs/trees) and moisture sources, and learn to identify caterpillars.

### Planning and Caring for a Butterfly Garden

- When designing your garden, **select plants that are good nectar sources** (see reverse). Plant large patches of each type of flower rather than one or two plants to help attract more butterflies to your yard. Select a high diversity of flowers that bloom at different times, so your butterflies have several nectar sources to choose from. In general, native plants are easier to care for than non-natives, but annuals such as marigolds and salvias can provide a nonstop nectar source to fill in any gaps in blooms and late season nectar.

- It is equally important to **include caterpillar food plants** (see next column). Butterflies lay eggs on these food plants, and the resulting caterpillars often rely exclusively on this plant for food (also called a "host" plant). For example, Black Swallowtails lay eggs on carrot family plants, such as parsley. You may have spotted the handsome green, black, and yellow caterpillar in your garden. By planting groups of each plant species, any caterpillar damage will be less noticeable.

- **Provide shelter and resting spots.** Include trees and shrubs in your yard; they provide butterflies with spots to roost overnight and escape predators, heat, wind, rain. Place large flat rocks where they will be warmed by the morning sun. Butterflies will use these rocks to bask so they can warm up enough to fly on cool mornings.

- **Butterflies need sun, as do the nectar and caterpillar food plants.** Select a garden spot that gets at least six hours of sun each day, with some protection from wind if possible. Kill any existing turf. Amend your soil with compost as needed.

- **Spring or fall are great times for adding perennials** to your garden. Add annuals in spring after the soil has warmed up. Seeds of some annuals, such as marigolds and zinnias, can be sewn directly into the soil. **Water your plants until they are established** and in dry periods. Natives tolerate drought better than non-natives. Also **mulch beds with composted leaves or shredded bark** to reduce the need for watering and add nutrients to the soil.

- **Avoid using pesticides and herbicides.** Most pesticides will kill butterflies and caterpillars and other beneficial insects, and herbicides wipe out a great early nectar source: dandelions.

- **Provide moisture.** Fill a shallow container with sand, bury it, and keep it moist so your butterflies can sip water and nutrients. Or scrape a small depression to create a moist area (water as needed).

- **Don't throw out your chrysalises!** Leave your dead plants standing in fall (this practice does not harm natives). Caterpillars often leave their food plant and climb up another plant or structure before forming a chrysalis, which can be hard to spot. Besides providing a substrate for overwintering chrysalises, dead plants add interest and provide seeds for the birds. **In late spring, loosely pile up plant debris in back of your garden;** do not place in a compost bin until later in summer. Some butterflies do not emerge until August.

- **Alternate food sources.** Some butterflies, such as Mourning Cloak, prefer sap or rotten fruit to nectar. Place rotted bananas or watermelon in a shallow dish in a location where wasps will not be a problem.

- **Don't pick off dead leaves** from your pussytoes, pearly everlastings, or nettles. American Lady and other caterpillars often hide in the leaves.

- **Learn to identify your butterfly caterpillars.**

### Top Food Plants for Caterpillars

(Butterfly caterpillars that use each plant are in bold.)

#### Annuals

- Parsley, Fennel, Carrots or Dill—**Black Swallowtail**
- Partridge Pea (*Cassia fasciculata*)—**Little Yellow**
- Snapdragon (*Antirrhinum majus*)—**Common Buckeye**

#### Perennials

- Asters—**Pearl Crescent**
- Milkweeds (Common, Swamp, Butterflyweed)—**Monarch**
- Nettles (*Urtica*)—**Eastern Comma, Milbert's Tortoiseshell, Red Admiral.** Hide this plant in the middle of bed, and wear gloves when working near it.
- Pussytoes (*Antennaria*) and Pearly Everlasting (*Anaphalis margaritaceae*)—**American Lady**
- Senna (*S. hebecarpa*)—**Sleepy Orange, Cloudless Sulfur**
- Turtlehead (*Chelone glabra*)—**Baltimore Checkerspot**
- Violets—**Great Spangled Fritillary; Aphrodite, Meadow Fritillaries**
- Native grasses, such as Prairie Dropseed and Little Bluestem—several species of **skippers, Common Wood Nymph**
- Dutchman's Pipe, *Aristolochia macrophylla*, *A. tomentosa* or *A. durior*—**Pipevine Swallowtail**, a rare, beautiful butterfly that in some years moves north to Wisconsin from the south.

#### Trees/Shrubs

- Eastern Red Cedar—**Juniper Hairstreak**
- Black Cherry—**Coral Hairstreak, Eastern Tiger Swallowtail, Spring Azure**
- Hackberry—**American Snout, Hackberry Emperor, Question Mark, Tawny Emperor**
- Oaks—**Banded Hairstreak, Red-Spotted Purple**
- Pines—**Eastern Pine Elfin**
- Poplars, aspens—**Mourning Cloak, Red-Spotted Purple, Viceroy**
- Willow—**Mourning Cloak, Viceroy**

### Wait, caterpillars are eating my plants!

If you find a caterpillar, remember that butterfly gardeners must learn to like or at least tolerate caterpillars! Plants almost always recover from caterpillar munching as many butterflies lay only a few eggs on each plant, and the caterpillars can only eat so much. You may want to give food plants extra water and compost. Your benevolence will be rewarded with more beautiful butterflies gracing your yard. It's helpful to learn how to identify butterfly caterpillars, many of which are really cool looking, so you know which ones to spare (see resources).

**Continued**

## Top Native Nectar Sources

### Perennials

- Blue Vervain (*Verbena hastata*)
- Butterflyweed (*Asclepias tuberosa*)
- Common Milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*)
- Hoary Vervain (*Verbena stricta*)
- Joe-pye Weed (*Eupatorium maculatum*)
- Mountain Mints (*Pycnanthemum*)
- New England Aster (*Aster novae-angliae*)
- Pale Purple Coneflower (*Echinacea pallida*)
- Prairie Blazing Star (*Liatris pycnostachya*)
- Puccoons (*Lithospermum*)
- Rough Blazing Star (*Liatris aspera*)
- Stiff Goldenrod (*Solidago rigida*)
- Swamp Milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*)
- Wild Bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*)

### Shrub

Buttonbush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*)

## Top Non-Native (non-invasive) Nectar Sources

### Annuals

- Bloodflower (*Asclepias curassavica*)
- French Marigolds
- Lantana
- Mexican Sunflower (*Tithonia rotundifolia*)
- Salvia "Victoria Blue"
- *Verbena bonariensis*
- Zinnias

### Perennials

- Coneflower (*Rudbeckia*)
- Garlic Chives (*Allium tuberosum*)
- Phlox (native species also good nectar sources)
- Sedum "Autumn Joy"

### Shrubs

- Bluebeard or Blue Mist (*Caryopteris*)
- Butterfly Bush (*Buddleia davidii*)

## Lawn Nectar Sources (dandelions & other weeds)

- Dandelions—These little yellow flowers are truly a very important early nectar source for many butterflies. Not many other plants are blooming at that time. Just keep repeating to yourself: dandelions are nice, dandelions are pretty....
- White clover—Tiny butterflies, such as the Eastern-tailed Blue, will nectar on clover. Clover also provides free nitrogen for your grass.
- Hawkweed—Many butterflies enjoy nectaring on hawkweed.

## Native Plant Sources

Native plants are readily available in Wisconsin; many more plants than those listed above are good nectar sources. Several catalogs and web sites indicate which plants are good butterfly nectar sources and list height and bloom times, provide color photos, etc.

UW-Madison Arboretum. Each May the Friends of the Arboretum sponsors a native plant sale. Pre-order or arrive early.

Agrecol (minimum purchase necessary, sold by flats or half flats)  
<http://www.agrecol.com>

SWBA Butterfly Gardening Fact Sheet, February 2008, Written by Ann Thering

Bluestem Farm, <http://www.bluestemfarm.com>  
Find them at the Dane County Farmers' Market.

Prairie Moon Nursery, <http://www.prairiemoon.com> (866) 417-8156

Prairie Nursery, <http://www.prairienursery.com> (800) 476-9453

Taylor Creek, <http://www.appliedeco.com/tcrn>

## So, what is that butterfly/caterpillar in my garden? Butterfly and Caterpillar Resources

Good field guides, web sites, and close-focusing binoculars allow butterfly enthusiasts to readily identify free-flying butterflies.

Butterflies through Binoculars. The East. Jeffrey Glassberg. Oxford Univ. Press, 1999. 242 pages.

Caterpillars in the Field and Garden. Thomas J. Allen, Jim P. Brock, Jeffrey Glassberg. Oxford Univ. Press, 2005. 232 pages.

Butterflies and Moths of North America <http://www.butterfliesandmoths.org/search>  
Some butterfly descriptions include caterpillar photos.

Enjoying Butterflies More. Attract Butterflies to Your Backyard! Jeffrey Glassberg. Bird Watcher's Digest, 1995. 33 pages.

For great views of butterflies, use close-focusing binoculars. Pentax Papilio's are recommended and reasonably priced. [www.eagleoptics.com](http://www.eagleoptics.com) (showroom in Middleton).

Butterfly Poster from the National Gardening Association,  
<http://nga-gardenshop.stores.yahoo.net/15-6344.html>

Wisconsin Butterflies <http://www.wisconsinbutterflies.org>  
Mike Reese's online field guide to Wisconsin butterflies includes photos and descriptions. Post your butterfly sightings here.

North American Butterfly Association <http://www.naba.org>

The North American Butterfly Association has lists of nectar and caterpillar food plants, butterfly gardening information, and more.

## Join the Southern Wisconsin Butterfly Association

<http://www.naba.org/chapters/nabawba/index.html>

Southern Wisconsin Butterfly Association (SWBA) is a chapter of the North American Butterfly Association. SWBA is dedicated to butterfly conservation and education. If you are interested in participating in butterfly field trips, annual butterfly counts, meetings, educational projects, and more, please consider joining our group. Information on membership can be found on our web site.

