



Butterfly Gardening in Texas



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Butterfly gardening is a fun, educational way to enjoy nature’s most abundant form of wildlife – insects! A basic understanding of the life history of butterflies, their food needs and the plants that provide these is all you need to plan and grow a garden suited for butterflies. Butterfly gardening requires some knowledge of local butterfly species, flowers that are attractive to nectar-feeding adults, and host plants for the developing caterpillars.

Adult butterflies feed on flower nectar, using it as an energy source for flight and egg production. Some butterflies also are attracted to moist soil at puddles and pond edges and fermenting sap exuding from wounds on tree trunks. Butterflies rest, hidden in foliage of plants, during nights and on cloudy or rainy days.

Butterflies are most abundant from spring through fall. Several species of butterflies—monarchs, cloudless sulfurs and snout butterflies—



migrate during late summer and fall. Plants that flower throughout the summer and into October and November attract migrating butterflies.

Nursery flowers that are excellent nectar sources include **white mist flower**, *Eupatorium wrightii*, white; **blue mist flower**, *Eupatorium greggii*, bluish-purple; **lantana**, *Lantana* spp., in assorted colors; **scarlet sage**, *Salvia coccinea*, red; **Indigo spires sage**, *Salvia* x ‘Indigo spires,’ blue; **butterfly weed**, *Asclepias tuberosa*, orange; and **Mexican mint marigold**, *Tagetes lucida*, yellow-orange. Two native plants that attract butterflies are the **common buttonbush**, *Cephalanthus occidentalis*, a white native, water-loving shrub, and **gayfeather**, *Liatris* spp., a spiked purple flower common along roadsides.

Local arboretums, botanical gardens and parks are excellent sources to observe butterflies and host plants. Make note of the flowers that attract butterflies, then talk to a local nurseryman about obtaining these plants for a home garden!

The addition of bait stations can enhance a butterfly garden. Bait stations use fermented or sweet liquids made from bananas or other cut fruit, brown sugar, beer or yeast. Painted on tree trunks or placed in dishes, bait attracts hackberry butterflies, tawny emperors and other brush-footed butterflies.

Some species—goatweed butterflies, comma butterflies and several other related brushfooted butterfly species—overwinter as adults. Most species, however, overwinter as one of the developmental stages of egg, caterpillar or as a pupa or chrysalis.

Caterpillars are vulnerable to predators, parasites, diseases, pesticides and environmental stresses. Control predators such as the red imported fire ant in and around the garden. Do not use contact insecticides or even *Bacillus*

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thurengiensis (Bt) products on host plants. If necessary for their protection, caterpillars can be raised in containers or screened cages. Provide them with fresh, clean leaves from their host plant daily. Most caterpillars develop through five stages (instars), molting between each stage, over 2 to 6 weeks before forming a chrysalis.

Caterpillars feed only on specific plants, usually wild plants and weeds. For a butterfly to complete its life cycle within a butterfly garden, the caterpillar must be allowed to feed on leaves and other plant parts. Excellent host plants for caterpillars include **common milkweed** or **butterfly weed** for rearing monarchs; **parsley**, **dill** and **fennel** for rearing the parsleyworm caterpillar (black swallowtail); **passionflower vines** (*Passiflora* spp.) for rearing the gulf fritillary; **citrus** or **Hercules club** for rearing the orange dog caterpillar (giant swallowtail butterfly); **canna** (*Canna x generalis*) for rearing the larger canna leafroller Brazilian skipper; and **nettles** and **thistles** for rearing caterpillars of several brush-footed butterfly species.

More butterfly gardening information can be found at <http://agpublications.tamu.edu>, <http://entowww.tamu.edu/extension> and <http://entowww.tamu.edu/entoweb/buttermot.html>.

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