

Invite butterflies into your yard

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office

You can invite butterflies into your landscape if you provide the right conditions and the right plants. If you want butterflies in your yard, there are certain things to do and certain things not to do.

The process is simple. The rewards are stunning.

Go ahead — imagine a garden full of beautiful flowers. Now, add the fluttering movement and brilliant color of butterflies and you have one of nature's most enchanting combinations.

Not satisfied with the occasional, chance appearance of butterflies, many gardeners are creating butterfly gardens with plants specially chosen to invite these creatures to the landscape.

To plant a butterfly garden properly, you need to have a general understanding of the life cycle of butterflies. They pass through four distinct stages: 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 (or teenage) butterfly.

Although some of the butterfly caterpillars, such as Gulf fritillary larva, appear to be heavily armed with spines, none can sting. On the other hand, moths are closely re-



PHOTO BY Dr. William M. Johnson

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lated to butterflies and have a caterpillar stage, but some moth caterpillars do sting.

Butterfly caterpillars feed voraciously on the leaves of plants. Each type of butterfly caterpillar will feed 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. Sulfur butterflies lay their eggs on cassias, and the preferred food of long-tailed skipper larvae is bean leaves (as in lima,

snap and other beans grown in the vegetable garden). The orange dog caterpillar, which feeds on citrus trees and disguises itself to look like bird droppings, grows up to be the spectacular swallowtail butterfly.

These plants, called larval food 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 I can think of where a gardener actually hopes a plant will be eaten by caterpillars.

Needless to say, the use of pesticides is not permitted in areas dedicated to butterfly gardens.

But remember that the caterpillars are picky about what plants they will feed on, so



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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 common 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*), coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*), wild ageratum (*Eupatorium coelestinum*), butterfly bush (*Buddleia* species), lantana (*Lantana camara*, L. *montevidensis*), pentas (*Pentas lanceolata*) and salvias (*Salvia* species).

Don't be disappointed if you don't see butterflies flocking to your yard in droves. Remember, a butterfly garden is an invitation, not a command performance.

The more plants you put in, and the longer you stick with it, the more likely you are to see butterflies. After a while, spotting a butterfly will be more common. And the first time you find caterpillars on your milkweed, parsley or passion vine, you'll find the excitement makes it all worthwhile.

As insects, butterflies are coldblooded 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. This is important in spring and fall when nights are cool. This location also is important because most larval and nectar food plants prefer to grow in a site that gets six to eight hours of direct sun a day.

Butterfly gardens strive to attract, welcome and nurture these fascinating and lovely insects that add so much to the

pleasures of gardening. With their abundance of bright, colorful flowers, these gardens also can contribute to the beauty of the overall landscape.

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

