



Bring Butterflies in for a Landing

By Barbara Elmore, HCMG

If you want to flag in some of the colorful butterflies flitting around outside, following simple guidelines can make your task easier: Draw them with bright colors, use manmade chemicals sparingly, nourish them with easy-to-grow nectar plants, and provide a place for them to lay their eggs.



Butterflies use their own color wheel when they are seeking nectar. They favor blossoms in hues of red, yellow, orange, pink or purple. In her comprehensive book *Butterfly Gardening for the South*, Texas author and veteran gardener Geyata Ajilvsgi notes that butterflies possess "the broadest spectrum of color vision known to exist in the animal kingdom," from ultraviolet through yellow-orange and red. The butterfly needs colors for communication, feeding and protection, she says.

Numerous plants attract butterflies, but anyone starting or adding to a garden might want to try the plants listed below. Each grows successfully in most regions of Texas, is relatively trouble-free and returns year after year. The bonus is that each one also reels in butterflies seeking nectar.

With a garden full of purple coneflower (Echinacea purpurea) and yellow lantana (Lantana camara), you will butterflies visiting

- Lantana (Lantana sp.), a native that boasts profuse orange, red and yellow hues throughout the spring and summer.
- Mexican mint marigold (Tagetes lucida) supplies small yellow blooms on a tall stem in late summer. Its foliage smells like anise.
- Purple coneflower (Echinacea angustifolia) blooms spring to fall. Although "purple" is part of this plant's name, the large, tall flowers are bright pink.
- Butterfly weed (Asclepias tuberosa) is a spring-to-fall bloomer that the insect can lay her eggs on.
- Aster (Aster sp.) supplies the garden with purple blossoms in the shape of daisies in the fall.

Beware – after the butterfly lays her eggs and caterpillars hatch, they will eat the vegetation. For example, monarchs lay their eggs on their underside of the butterfly weed, and the larvae often strip the leaves. Happily, both leaves and flowers will return.

Other host plants – plants that "host" the caterpillars – include parsley, fennel, passionflower, nasturtiums and even bluebonnets. If you provide host plants for the butterfly larvae to munch on, keep them going through the winter. You can do this by starting new plants in pots.

Butterflies "puddle," Ajilvsgi notes in her book. The puddles might contain dung, urine or dead animals, which provide the nutrients the butterflies need. For a garden without flowers, she recommends a butterfly feeder containing a mixture of ½ teaspoon honey, ½ teaspoon sugar, a heavy dash of salt and a cup of water. Butterflies also like Gatorade.

Other tips for thoughtful butterfly gardening:

- Avoid chemical sprays in your garden unless you don't want butterflies on the plants. Try Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*) on the plants you don't want the larvae to eat.
- Don't locate butterfly-attracting plants near a birdfeeder because the birds will eat the caterpillars if they find them.
- Apartment dwellers, don't despair. Find a sunny outdoor spot and use pots or hanging containers of blooming plants. You can use lantana, verbena, petunia and nasturtiums.



Gulf fritillary butterflies lay their eggs on the passion flower vine (Passiflora incarnata).