

Gardening for Butterflies by Gillian Boyd

Many years ago I spent the summer making a butterfly meadow. I found it so interesting and satisfying that I resolved to make a garden version in my own backyard

There are poplars in the park behind our house and my neighbourhood also has a variety of oaks, ashes, birches, elms and willows. Across the park are woods with swampy areas and I also have a wildflower ditch in front of the house. Such sites include many of the specific host plants that each butterfly species needs for laying eggs. The female butterfly finds the right plant by 'tasting' leaves through sensors on her feet. Apart from the trees mentioned, other host plants include the carrot family, milkweeds, nettles, thistles, asters, vetches and violets. Because many of these plants already grow locally, I decided to concentrate on planting nectar flowers to attract butterflies.

The hardest part was deciding on the layout of any new beds because I am not good at drawing plans or sketches. However, once the snow had gone and the ground had dried out, I was able to create shapes directly on the grass using lengths of old garden hosepipe, and I found this worked very well.

I do not have an ideal site so my main butterfly bed went in the sunniest spot because butterflies need the sun's warmth for energy. In deciding on the shape and placing of new beds, I made sure that I could easily wheel a heavily-loaded barrow between them, without having to make awkward turns. I left the hosepipe-outlined beds for a week to adjust and view from an upstairs window while I dreamed of visions to come.

Because I have poor sandy soil, I didn't remove the grass, but left it to become organic matter in the beds. So first I cut out a 10cm strip of sod round the beds, and then covered the grass inside with layers of newspaper, soaking them as I went to stop them blowing away. On top of the newspaper I built a 15cm organic base of manure, compost, shredded leaves and grass clippings, and then added an additional 15cm layer of topsoil.

Now there are only grass paths round three large island beds, and five extended or smaller beds. I also made a tiny pool for birds, close to a shady sitting area. The soothing trickle of water nearby is very peaceful and squirrels, birds and insects use it all the time.

I had a lot of space to fill and took my time exploring possibilities. About half the plants came from my existing garden while the rest came from generous friends, plant sales, garden centres and nurseries. Everything flourished and grew very vigorously and the garden was transformed into a fascinating world of flowers and beneficial insects.

There are numerous books about making gardens for butterflies. The more you read, the more overwhelmed you may feel by too much information. Books often generalise and may not cover useful specific details. I suggest you choose plants you like and think will do well in your garden conditions. Get to know what local butterflies you might expect to see. For instance, the Black Swallowtail butterfly will lay eggs on parsley, dill and fennel, none of which are hard to grow. The caterpillars don't eat much so you will have more than enough to share with them and then the thrill of new adult butterflies enjoying the flowers you planted. Monarch butterflies only use milkweeds for egg-laying and these are also excellent nectar plants for all butterflies.

Butterflies particularly like flowers that provide a flat landing pad, or cones, clusters or spikes. Probing each tiny flowerlet without having to fly between every flower saves them energy. Such plants include coneflower (*Echinacea*), yarrow (*Achillea*) and Joe Pye weed (*Eupatorium*). Hybrid plants and showy cultivars rarely attract them because they are less rich in nectar, sterile or inaccessible if double-flowered, so remember to include species plants as well as single-flowered cultivars. Good annuals include candytuft, bachelor's buttons and the annual euphorbia known as snow-on-the-mountain.

Toxic chemicals are harmful to all insects, so they should be avoided. If you rely on organic methods, you will find that your plants are stronger and more resistant to damage. You will also attract many more birds and beneficial insects to control possible pest problems.

At present, attracting butterflies can be a matter of chance because gardens like mine are few and far between. Butterflies can often survive natural disasters and bad weather but once their habitat is lost to development, they are lost too. If we could create a network of butterfly gardens we could help prevent their decline.

So why not try something like this? It isn't all that difficult. Make one bed and see how it goes. Planting a large variety of species will attract an equal diversity of bees, butterflies and beneficial insects. You will gain the privilege and pleasure of watching your garden grow and hum with life every season. You will also learn a lot and in good summers have myriad butterflies for company.

- **Reference Handbook:** Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Butterflies (1981).
- **Local Butterflies:** Cabbage White, Spring Azure, Mourning Cloak, Tiger Swallowtail, Red Admiral, White Admiral, Black Swallowtail, Monarch, Great Spangled Fritillary, Common Sulphur.
- **Other recommended plants:** Arabis; Fall Asters; Beebalm (*Monarda* sp); Blazing-star (*Liatris* spp); Butterfly bush (*Buddleia* sp – not reliably hardy); Dame's Rocket (*Hesperis matronalis*); Giant Hyssop (*Agastache* sp); Goldenrod (*Solidago rigida*); Pincushion flower (*Scabiosa* spp); Swamp milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*); *Verbena bonariensis* – annual.