

Keep Butterflies Happy: Plant Them an Oasis!

Yes, you can help save the monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*), the black-veined orange migratory butterfly that winters in Mexico and travels all the way to Canada in the summer, by planting milkweeds (*Asclepias* spp.). Its population has been declining for at least 50 years and if the population keeps dropping at this rate, within a generation this emblematic butterfly will no longer grace our fields and gardens. Since milkweeds are the only plants monarch butterfly caterpillars can eat, the media have run with that concept, making the solution seem so simple: plant a milkweed, save a butterfly. What could be easier?

But that's not enough: only monarch butterfly caterpillars feed exclusively on milkweed plants. The adults feed on the nectar of a wide range of flowers and need flowers in bloom throughout the summer, yet milkweeds finish blooming in July. If we planted only milkweeds, the monarchs would starve long before they made it back to Mexico!

More Flowers, More Butterflies

Also, it's not just the monarchs that are in decline: the numbers of almost all of North America's some 800 native butterflies are decreasing in number and 17% are worse off than monarchs, facing imminent extinction. So, what can you do?

Plant flowers, lots of flowers, vast beds of nectar-rich flowers that bloom from spring through fall. That will feed not only monarchs, but a huge range of other butterfly species.

Create Your Own Butterfly Oasis

If you want to create a butterfly garden on your lot or organize one at your school or in a local park, here are some considerations:

1. Ideally, it should be in full sun in a spot protected from the wind.
2. For abundant bloom, add compost as you plant to enrich the soil and improve its tilth and drainage.

3. Do include milkweeds (*Asclepias* spp.) to feed monarch caterpillars, but also include a wide range of other nectar-bearing flowers to feed the adult butterflies.
4. The larger the flower bed, the more butterflies it will attract. Do you really need the vast sea of green lawn that surrounds most houses and that is essentially a butterfly desert?
5. You have to learn to accept a bit of imperfection in a butterfly garden. Yes, some leaves will be munched on: the caterpillars need to eat something!
6. Give butterflies a space in the sun where they can warm up on cool mornings; a flat rock, a table, a few chairs.
7. Create a little butterfly puddle by filling plates or shallow pans with sand and a bit of water. Then place in a sunny spot. Many butterflies love them!
8. Avoid treating your butterfly garden with products toxic to butterflies, such as insecticides. If you feel you have to treat plants in the garden, prefer gentle treatments like a sharp spray of water or hand picking. Even organic insecticides, like insecticidal soap and neem, can harm caterpillars and butterflies.
9. Include a wild corner where you just let plants grow on their own. A lot of butterfly food plants are—let's face it!—a bit weedy: thistles, mallows, wild cherries, etc. The wild corner can be in a less visible part of the yard.
10. Don't clean up in the fall. An astounding number of butterflies (great spangled fritillary, red-banded hairstreak and so many others) use leaf litter at some point in their lives, either as food or as shelter. Many overwinter in dead leaves. Just let fall leaves and dying annuals and perennials decompose on their own. Or pick up fall leaves from your lawn and toss them into the oasis: even as they protect butterflies, they'll act like a natural compost, decomposing and enriching the soil to ensure more blooms the following year.

Nectar Plants

Butterflies will slurp nectar from most flowers, but have their preferences. For example, they prefer clustered flowers, such as are found in the Asteraceae, Apiaceae and Verbenaceae families. Either loose clusters, like lantanas or verbenas, or dense flower heads, like black-eyed Susans and coneflowers, will do. The latter even come with a butterfly landing platform, the ray flowers (their so-called petals) that surround the flower head. Butterflies generally find single flowers, especially small ones, less attractive.

Brightly colored flowers attract butterflies, but most are relatively indifferent to floral scents.

Beware of double flowers: sometimes, but not always, the extra petioles render the nectar inaccessible to butterflies.

The traditional belief that you should choose strictly native flowers for your butterfly oasis is now considered erroneous: studies show that a mixture of native and imported flowers attracts and feeds the most butterflies. Certainly, many long-blooming annuals, like zinnias and cosmos, are absolute butterfly magnets, yet almost none are native to Canada.

Butterfly Plants to Try

Fill your butterfly oasis with some of the following plants. In fact, plant lots of them!

1. **Ageratum** (*Ageratum* spp.) – annual
2. **Allium** (*Allium* spp.) – zones 2–9
3. **Alyssum** (*Lobularia* × *hybridum*) – annual
4. **Aster** (*Aster* spp., *Symphotrichum* spp. and several other genera) – zones 2–9
5. **Azalea** (*Rhododendron* spp.) – zones 3–9
6. **Balloon Plant** (*Gomphocarpus* spp.) – annual or zones 10–11
7. **Bee balm** (*Monarda* spp.) – zones 3–9
8. **Black-eyed Susan or rudbeckia** (*Rudbeckia* spp.) – zones 3–9
9. **Blanket Flower** (*Gaillardia* spp.) – annual or zones 3–10
10. **Blazing Star** (*Liatris* spp.) – zones 3–8
11. **Blue false indigo** (*Baptisia australis*) – zones 3–8
12. **Bluebeard** (*Caryopteris* spp.) – zones 5–9
13. **Blueberry** (*Vaccinium* spp.) – zones 3–9
14. **Boltonia or false aster** (*Boltonia* spp.) zones 3–8
15. **Boneset** (*Eupatorium* spp.) – zones 3–9
16. **Butterfly Bush** (*Buddleia* spp.) – zones 6–9
17. **Buttonbush** (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*) – zones 4–9

18. **Buttonbush** (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*) – zones 4–10
19. **Carnation** (*Dianthus caryophyllus*) – annual or zones 5–9
20. **Catmint** (*Nepeta* spp.) – zones 3–9
21. **Celosia or cockscomb** (*Celosia* spp.) – annual
22. **Chives, Garlic** (*Allium tuberosum*) – zones 3–8
23. **Coneflower or echinacea** (*Echinacea* spp.) – zones 3–9
24. **Coreopsis** (*Coreopsis* spp.) – zones 3–9
25. **Cosmos** (*Cosmos* spp.) – annual
26. **Crownbeard** (*Verbesina* spp.) – zones 4–8
27. **Culver's Root** (*Veronicastrum* spp.) – zones 3–9
28. **Dahlia** (*Dahlia* × *hortensis*, varieties with single flowers) – annual
29. **Daisy** (*Leucanthemum* spp.) — zones 3–8
30. **Echinacea** (*Echinacea* spp.) – zones 3–9
31. **Egyptian star flower** (*Pentas lanceolata*) – annual
32. **Fennel** (*Foeniculum vulgare*) – annual or zones 6–10
33. **Gaillardia** (*Gaillardia* spp.) – annual or zones 3–10
34. **Garden Verbena** (*Verbena* x *hybrida*) – annual
35. **Giant hyssop** (*Agastache scrophulariifolia*) – zones 4–7
36. **Globeflower** (*Gomphrena* spp.) —annual
37. **Golden Alexander** (*Zizia aurea*) – zones 3–8
38. **Golden Dewdrops** (*Duranta* spp.) – annual
39. **Goldenrod** (*Solidago* spp.) – zones 3–9
40. **Hollyhock** (*Alcea rosea*) – zones 3–9
41. **Hoptree** (*Ptelea trifoliata*) – zones 4 b-9

42. **Ironweed** (*Vernonia* spp.) – zones 4–9
43. **Joe-Pye Weed** (*Eutrochium*, formerly *Eupatorium* spp.) – zones 3–9
44. **Lantana** (*Lantana* spp.) – annual
45. **Lilac** (*Syringa* spp.) – zones 3 to 8
46. **Marigold** (*Tagetes* spp.) – annual
47. **Mauve** (*Malva* spp.) – zones 3–9
48. **Mexican sunflower** (*Tithonia rotundifolia*) – annual
49. **Milkweed** (*Asclepias* spp.) – zones 3–10, according to species
50. **Mistflower or hardy ageratum** (*Conoclinium* spp.) – zones 5–10
51. **Mountain Mint** (*Pycnanthemum* spp.) – zones 4–8
52. **Pansy** (*Viola x wittrockiana*) – annual
53. **Pearly everlasting** (*Anaphalis margaritacea*) – zones 3–8
54. **Phlox, Garden** (*Phlox paniculata*) – zones 3–8
55. **Pipevine** (*Aristolochia macrophylla*) – zones 4–8
56. **Porterweed** (*Stachytarpheta* spp.) – annual or zones 9–11
57. **Rose** (*Rosa* spp., varieties with single flowers) – zones 3–10
58. **Rose Verbena** (*Glandularia canadensis*) – annual or zones 6–9
59. **Rosinweed** (*Silphium* spp.) – zones 4–8
60. **Sage** (*Salvia* spp.) – annual or zones 5–11
61. **Sage, Russian** (*Perovskia* spp.) – zones 4 b-9
62. **Sea holly** (*Eryngium* spp.) perennial, zones 4–8
63. **Sedum** (*Sedum* spp. and *Hylotelephium* spp.) – zones 3–9
64. **Spirea** (*Spiraea* spp.) – zones 3–8
65. **Sunflower** (*Helianthus annua*) – annual

66. **Sweet rocket** (*Hesperis matronalis*) – zones 3–8
67. **Tall Verbena** (*Verbena bonariensis*) – annual or zones 7–9
68. **Thoroughwort** (*Eupatorium* spp.) – zones 3–9
69. **Tickseed** (*Coreopsis* spp.) – zones 3–9
70. **Zinnia** (*Zinnia* spp.) – annual

The simple rule is: *plant lots of flowers if you want to feed lots of butterflies!*