

Attract Butterflies to the Landscape

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Florida is home to over 180 species of butterflies which is the highest of any state east of the Mississippi River. Forty of these species are unique to Florida.



Butterflies are important to the environment for many reasons. They are pollinators, food for other animals, and are indicators of a healthy ecosystem. In addition, they are fun to watch as the adults flutter throughout the landscape and the young devour their host plants. An added bonus is that most butterfly gardens attract hummingbirds too. It is easy to attract butterflies to your landscape. Follow a few simple steps, and they will come.

Step 1: Select a sunny site to plant flowering nectar plants. Butterflies are cold-blooded and bask in the sun to warm their bodies. As temperatures rise to around 85 to 100°F, butterfly activity increases. Some butterflies prefer shady areas on the edge of forested areas, so to increase the diversity of butterflies in the landscape, place the garden adjacent to a natural area with trees. If possible, put the garden in a spot that will be seen from inside the home so you can enjoy it when it's too hot to venture out.

Step 2: Include both adult nectar sources and caterpillar food plants in the garden. If there are specific butterflies that you want to attract, find out what food the caterpillars eat. Caterpillars are like some children; they are very picky eaters. For example, milkweeds are food for both monarch and queen caterpillars whereas dill, fennel and parsley are food for black swallowtail caterpillars. Many trees can double as shelter and a food source like citrus (giant swallowtail), red bay (laurel swallowtail), elms (question mark), and willow (viceroy).



For adult butterflies, most feed on flower nectar. Butterflies are attracted to color and the most effective technique to attract more butterflies is to group similar colors together versus mixing up colors. Select flowers that will bloom at various times throughout the year and with different flower sizes. Butterflies like cluster flowers or large solitary flowers that provide a sturdy perch. Some examples of good nectar plants include milkweed (*Asclepias curassavica*), butterfly bush (*Buddleia davidii*), firebush (*Hamelia patens*), impatiens, lantana, Joe-pye weed (*Eupatorium fistulosum*), firespike (*Odontonmea strictum*), Pentas (older varieties), firecracker plant (*Russelia equisetiformis*), pineapple sage (*Salvia rutilans*), Mexican sunflower (*Tithonia canadensis*), Joe-pye weed (*Eupatorium fistulosum*) and plumbago (*Plumbago auriculata*).





Not all adult butterflies feed solely on flower nectar. Some feed on tree sap, rotting fruit like bananas, dung, and rotting meat. Place rotting fruit in shallow containers, clean containers and replace fruit weekly. To keep ants away from the fruit, place the container inside a larger container filled with water. This will create a moat for the ants but is still accessible for butterflies.

Step 3: Provide shelter for butterflies during bad weather. Select plants that have different heights and growth habits to create horizontal and vertical diversity. Planting the butterfly garden adjacent to a wooded area would serve the same purpose. Butterfly houses are not substitute shelters during bad weather. The shelters are cute but butterflies do not use them.

Step 4: Provide puddling areas, especially during dry weather. Male butterflies form “puddle-clubs” to extract salts and amino acids from soil necessary for mating. There are several ways to create a puddling area and still conserve water. One way is to bury a shallow, plastic storage container, cover the edges with soil, fill the container with sand, and wet thoroughly. Mix in a small amount of table salt and a capful of fish emulsion fertilizer to make the area more enticing.

Step 5: Last but not least, keep pesticides away from the butterfly garden. Butterflies are very sensitive to pesticides and caterpillars may die from eating plants purchased at nurseries because of past pesticide use.

To learn more about butterfly gardening, go to http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/document_uw057.