

Tips to Attract More Butterflies to the Landscape

KRISTA HARDING, HORTICULTURE AGENT

If you haven't jumped on the bandwagon of planting to attract butterflies – you need to! I love watching butterflies flit around my yard. Not only are they enjoyable to watch, but they also serve as pollinators for some plants. Sure, some butterflies will probably always visit your yard from time to time, but if you want to get serious about attracting more to your landscape, you must provide for their basic needs. This includes food, shelter, liquids, and a sunning location.



If you want butterflies to be more than just visitors looking for a good source of nectar, then you have to create a true butterfly habitat. This will encourage more butterflies to call your garden their home! One way to encourage more butterflies to your landscape is by utilizing plants that serve the needs of all stages of the butterfly. This means planting nectar plants and host plants.

Nectar plants are what the adult butterflies feed on. It is the color and shape of these flowers that will attract the butterflies. Plant nectar plants in masses using three or more plants of one variety. In the nectar plant category, there are many annuals and perennials that can be utilized. Some of the must-have annuals include zinnias, lantana, verbena, and French marigold to name just a few. Perennials utilized as a nectar plant include aster, black-eyed Susan, coneflower, milkweed, catmint and bee balm.

Even some shrubs and herbs are great nectar plants for butterflies. Of course, as the name would imply, butterfly bush is a great addition, along with lilac, mock orange, and spirea. Grow herbs for not only culinary purposes but as a nectar and host source. Plant chives, dill, sage, thyme, and fennel.

Host plants are those plants that butterflies lay their eggs on and that caterpillars feed on. Plant these with the expectation that they will be partially eaten by the developing butterfly. For me, I love walking out and looking at the developing caterpillars and I'm happy to share my plants with them! At the top of this plant list, it is milkweed. Milkweed is the exclusive food source for Monarch caterpillars. There are many different types of milkweed, but the butterfly milkweed is one of the more eye-catching. Other host plants that I like to plant include parsley, dill and fennel. These are great host plants for Black Swallowtails.

Butterflies also need protection from the wind and predators. This can be accomplished by incorporating certain trees and shrub species into the landscape. Butterflies use hackberry, elm, ash, willow and pawpaw trees. Host shrubs include spicebush and prickly ash.

You can make your butterflies feel more at home in the landscape if you will add a few light colored stones. Place these in a location protected from the wind. This will become an area where butterflies can bask in the sun and warm themselves. Incorporate a shallow container filled with sand and keep it moist. Butterflies will gather on the damp sand to take up needed salts and minerals. An occasional treat of rotting or overripe fruit will also keep butterflies happy!

Finally, be mindful of pesticide use. Pesticides not only kill undesirable insect pests, but they also kill butterflies and their caterpillars.

Now is the time to get busy creating a butterfly habitat! I have some wonderful resources available at the Extension office that offers a complete listing of plants. These can be found on the home page of our district website: southwind.ksu.edu or you can pick up a copy at any of our office locations.

Krista Harding is a K-State Research and Extension Horticulture agent assigned to Southwind District. She may be reached at kharding@ksu.edu or 620-244-3826.

K-State Research and Extension is an equal opportunity provider and employer.