



Butterfly Gardening

Gardening for butterflies might seem like a daunting task, but it's actually pretty easy. Having butterflies, and other pollinators in your garden is beneficial to your plants (especially vegetables), enjoyable, and a great educational tool to get your children involved and interested in science and the outdoors.

The most important thing to keep in mind when gardening for butterflies is that they go through four different life cycles. Each stage has its own needs, and if your garden can accommodate each stage, you'll have butterflies in abundance!

The adults, or butterflies, are really the payoff for a little preparation for the other stages. Adult butterflies feed almost exclusively off the nectar of flowers. Almost anything that flowers will attract butterflies, but they naturally prefer brighter colored flowers that are easy to see. Large clusters of flowers and groupings of flowers are also beneficial. This gives the butterflies lots of food in a small space, and they won't have to travel to find more. Some good nectar plants include butterfly bush, cherry trees, goldenrod, coneflowers, coreopsis, and mint.

Keep in mind that butterflies are cold-blooded, so your butterfly garden needs to be in a sunny spot. Rocks, pavers, or even sculptures or other garden art will offer much needed places for the butterflies to rest and bask in the sun to stay warm. They also need water, but very small amounts; they do best with a little bucket of wet sandy soil, or even a sponge that you can keep wet. They have specialized mouthparts that allows them to siphon water and other nutrients.

Once butterflies mate, the female butterfly will lay her eggs on plants that the caterpillars will eat once they hatch. Butterfly caterpillars can be very particular on what kind of plants they will eat, depending on the type of caterpillar it is. For example, Viceroy Caterpillars will eat almost only willow tree leaves. If the appropriate plant isn't nearby, the caterpillar could easily starve. Other plants that butterfly caterpillars usually feed on are milkweed, parsley, dill, and fennel. The caterpillars will eat *a lot* of plant material in just a few short weeks. This is the usually the stage gardeners have a hard time with – there are going to be some tattered plants, especially if you have a lot of caterpillars take up residence. Just keep in mind the more caterpillars you see feeding means more butterflies! Caterpillars are very susceptible to a few dangers at this time in their lives. Birds, rodents, and other small animals, even insects, like to feed on them. Butterfly caterpillars are also likely to be killed by insecticides, so keep their use to a minimum.

After eating their fill, the caterpillar finds a place that seems safe from predators, and begins to form the cocoon, or chrysalis. Another week or two and the butterfly emerges, continuing the cycle!

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