Butterfly Gardening

“The power to enrich a patch of earth with beautiful butterflies, no matter how humble the plot or simple the effort, is awesome.”
– Robert Pyle

Butterflies in Our Midst

The San Francisco Bay Area is home to 142 species of butterflies, which depend on a great diversity of plant communities. With each passing decade, however, fewer and fewer butterflies are commonly seen. They cannot live on concrete and asphalt. As wild meadows and flower-coated hillsides give way to development, the quality of our living environment declines while, for other species, existence itself becomes threatened. Ecologist Robert Pyle expresses his concern about what he has called “the extinction of experience – the loss of everyday species within our own radius of reach.”

According to Pyle, “When we lose the common wildlife in our immediate surroundings, we run the risk of becoming inured to nature’s absence, blind to delight, and . . . alienated from the land.”

What We Can Do

Butterflies, however, needn’t disappear. In fact, the pattern of decline can even be reversed by those willing to do some butterfly gardening.

If each of us plants a few flowers to provide nectar for adult butterflies and some host plants to serve as food for caterpillars (which become butterflies), the entire texture of our communities can be enhanced. Regardless of how small our garden space may be we can still have a positive impact on the butterfly population. One square foot of space can provide a feeding station for many butterflies.

A flower pot or window box filled with cosmos and zinnias makes an excellent “butterfly restaurant.” A somewhat larger patch of ground planted with Buddleia (butterfly bush) or a vast plot sown with native wildflowers can attract and nurture thousands of butterflies.

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The human race faces a multitude of environmental problems. Thinning ozone, acid rain, polluted rivers and lakes, and global warming present complex problems which seem to defy solutions, especially at the level of the individual.

However, working in our own backyards, we can help to stem the destruction of our local ecosystems by promoting species diversity. By restoring and protecting habitat in our own yards, we not only please ourselves, we hold open the possibility that future generations can also experience the natural splendor and living art provided by butterflies among garden blossoms.

Tips and Techniques for the Butterfly Gardener

1. The ideal location for a butterfly garden is an area open to your view and enjoyment, yet relatively undisturbed by pets or playing children.

2. Because butterflies are cold-blooded, their flight muscles will not work if they are chilled; so a warm, sunny, wind-protected area is the perfect spot for your butterfly garden. Tall background plants, walls, or fencing can provide a wind shelter.

3. Plant flowers that are preferred by butterflies. Their favorite colors are pink, purple, yellow, and orange. Flat flowers (zinnias and cosmos), short tubular flowers (lupine), and flower clusters (verbena and lantana) are best because they provide easy access to nectar. Drooping flowers, though nectar-rich, are less suitable because they provide no place to perch comfortably while sipping.

4. Occasional “sun bathing” allows a butterfly to remain active by raising its body temperature. A few flat stones or boulders in sunny areas of the garden will provide a place for basking.

5. Many butterflies drink water and extract mineral salts from damp soil and puddles. Including shallow pools or moist spots will attract a “puddle club.”

6. The most successful, environmentally sound gardens are those which are pesticide-free. The enchantment provided by a garden alive with butterflies will far outweigh the annoyance of a few undesirable garden pests.

Cover photos: upper, Western tiger swallowtail lower, variable checkerspot

Mourning cloak

Western tiger swallowtail nectaring on daisy tree.

Cosmos

Monkey flower

Zinnia

Monarch butterflies nectaring on Mexican sunflower.

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The following plant species are considered excellent for attracting butterflies. Try a few and watch your art-in-motion garden come alive.

### NECTAR PLANTS (for butterflies)

#### Perennials

- Yarrow
- False Indigo
- Coast Rock Cress
- Common Milkweed
- Butterfly Bush
- Wild Lilac
- Coreopsis
- Coreopsis
- Purple Cone Flower
- Buckwheat
- Lantana
- Silver Lupine
- Lupine
- Sticky Monkey Flower
- Daisy Tree
- Common Monkey Flower
- Flowering Tobacco
- Wild Tobacco
- Black-eyed Susan
- Sedum (Stonecrop)
- Goldenrod
- Johnny-jump-up

#### Annuals

- Cosmos
- Heliotrope
- Alyssum
- Pincushion Flower
- Mexican Sunflower
- Verbena
- Zinnia

### FOOD PLANTS (for caterpillars)

#### Perennials

- Dutchman’s Pipe
- Milkweed
- Michaelmas Daisy
- Borage
- Wild Lilac
- Lupine

#### Annuals

- Snapdragon
- Nasturtium
- Violet

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**CALIFORNIA NATIVES**

- Achilea millefolium
- Amorpha californica
- Arabis blepharophylla
- Asclepias speciosa
- Buddleia davidii
- Coreopsis californica
- Coreopsis lanceolata
- Echinacea purpurea
- Eriogonum fasciulatum
- Lupinus albifrons
- Mimulus aurantacus
- Montanoa grandiflora
- Nicotiana alata
- Nicotiana (some)
- Sedum species
- Solidago species
- Viola pedunculata

- Aristolochia californica
- Asclepias speciosa (some)
- Aster regulinuis
- Borago officinalis
- Ceanothus species
- Lupinus species

- Antirrhinum majus
- Tropaeolum species
- Viola species

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**CALIFORNIA NATIVE AND HOST**

- Asclepias species (some)
- Rudbeckia laciniata
- Sedum species
- Tithonia rotundifolia
- Verbena species (some)

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**Further Reading:**

- The Butterfly Book, Stokes & Williams
- The Butterfly Garden, Tekulsky

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**Visitor Centers**

- **ARDENWOOD HISTORIC FARM**
  Fremont (510) 796-0663
  awvisit@ebparks.org

- **BLACK DIAMOND MINES**
  Antioch (925) 757-2620
  bdvisit@ebparks.org

- **COYOTE HILLS REGIONAL PARK**
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  chvisit@ebparks.org

- **CRAB COVE**
  Alameda (510) 521-6887
  ccove@ebparks.org

- **SUNOL REGIONAL WILDERNESS**
  Sunol (925) 862-2601
  svisit@ebparks.org

- **TILDEN NATURE AREA/EEC and LITTLE FARM**
  Berkeley (510) 525-2233
  tnarea@ebparks.org

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The Regional Parks Botanic Garden, located in Tilden Park, Berkeley, has an annual native plant sale on the third Saturday of April. Many butterfly-attracting plants are available. (510) 841-8732

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This brochure is provided as a public service of the Interpretive and Recreation Services Department of the East Bay Regional Park District. For more information, call one of the visitor centers listed above.

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