

Environmental Enhancement with Ornamentals:

Butterfly Gardening

Original manuscript by Mel Garber, Former Extension Horticulturist

Reviewed by Bob Westerfield, Extension Horticulturist



UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
EXTENSION

Ornamental plants provide homeowners the means to improve their local environment in many ways. Generally, all you need is knowledge of appropriate plant varieties and how to utilize them in the landscape.

Butterfly populations can be greatly enhanced by devoting a portion of the landscape to butterfly habitat. In addition to their natural beauty, butterflies serve as valuable plant pollinators. The three necessary ingredients to attract and maintain butterfly populations all summer are:

- nectar-producing plants
- larval food plants
- a shallow pool of water

Nectar-producing plants provide food for adults (the butterfly). Characteristics of good butterfly-attracting plants include:

- sweet, pungent and highly fragrant flowers
- red, purple, orange, yellow or pink flower colors
- simple, open flowers

Flowers that are deep-throated or enclosed are not conducive to nectar collection. Most of the plants recommended as nectar food plants are herbaceous or woody perennials. Plant them in a sunny border area of your landscape. The following plants are good nectar sources.

Trees and Shrubs	Wildflowers and Perennials	Annuals
Butterfly bush (Buddleia)	Dwarf lantana	Pentas
Bottlebrush	Queen Anne's lace	Cosmos
Dogwood	Purple coneflower	Impatiens
Mountain ash	Hollyhock	Salvia
Hawthorne	Milkweed	Marigold (singles)
Crabapple	Coreopsis	Petunia
Sumac	Sunflowers	Verbena
Blueberry	Red clover	Zinnia
Viburnum	Vetches	Black-eyed Susan
Raspberry	Goldenrod	Aster
Azalea	Phlox	

If you have a limited area to landscape, three plants most commonly recommended for butterfly gardens are pentas, lantana and butterfly bush (Buddleia). Pentas should be grown as an annual, particularly in Atlanta. With mild winters and heavy mulching, pentas in south Georgia will sometimes survive as a perennial. Lantana and butterfly bush are excellent perennial shrubs that flower through the spring, summer and fall. Both plants should be cut back in February or March since flowers occur on new growth. To attract the swallowtail butterfly, you can include fennel in your border plants.

Although nectar-producing plants are necessary to attract adult butterflies, the ideal butterfly garden requires food plants and habitat for the larvae (caterpillars). Many of the grasses and wildflowers native to Georgia are suitable for larvae food. The plant material should be located in an undisturbed area that is free of pesticides (in this case, we want the caterpillars to flourish!).

Start with an unmowed area of the lawn that receives lots of sun. These meadow areas should only be mowed at the end of the butterfly season (October to November) to avoid harming the larvae. The larvae of each butterfly have a fairly strong preference when it comes to their diet; however, groups of plants that are desirable to a fairly wide range of butterfly larvae include willow, wild cherry, milkweeds, sweet bay, passion vine, legumes, crucifers and asters. Many of the wildflowers that perform well in the Southeast provide excellent nectar and larvae food.

Wildflower seed mixes, some developed by the University of Georgia, are commercially available and can be sown in sunny meadow areas. This is an easy, low-cost way to enhance the butterfly and larvae food source. Wildflowers also provide natural areas that are low-maintenance and water efficient.

Another necessary ingredient for a sustained butterfly population is a source of water. Butterflies will not drink from open, deep water areas. Therefore, it is necessary to provide one or more shallow water sources. Wet sand or mud makes an excellent watering hole. The saucer designed to fit beneath clay or plastic pots also makes an excellent water source — just add sand to make it shallow. A rock or other object in the center of the saucer provides a resting spot for the butterfly.

A large, colorful butterfly population can be maintained in your landscape if you provide an undisturbed meadow area with: (1) nectar-producing plants, (2) larvae food plants and (3) a shallow source of water.

extension.uga.edu