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Butterfly Frenzy in the Garden

by Ben Brown, UVM Student

We are dependent on plants for the providence of food, clothing, and oxygen, and, by association, the insects involved in pollination. Seeing that pollinators receive food, shelter, and mating grounds in return for spreading a plant's pollen to nearby relatives, it seems natural that we should take steps to nourish and enhance this mutualistic relationship. Pollinators, and their services, have largely been taken for granted in North America and are now in jeopardy. While it is important to understand how we have forwarded the processes involved in pollinator elimination and habitat loss, this article aims to inform the reader on how best to attract and support the rare pollinator, namely butterflies.

Having your garden extremely tidy and weed-free should not be a priority. A garden that resembles a natural setting will create butterfly habitat in all four life-stages. By ignoring the growth of dandelions, clovers, and grasses along the edge of a garden, one can provide shelter and early nectar to some species. It is beneficial to let fallen leaves create a natural mulch where moths and skippers can pupate (Schappert, 2003). The leaf residue also helps to maintain fertility throughout the garden.

Sunshine is the most important factor in selecting garden location. Remember that south-facing gardens tend to maximize daily sun exposure. Butterflies avoid shady areas because they are cold-blooded and need ample sunlight to survive. If the air temperature of your garden drops below 60 degrees, do not expect many butterflies to arrive on the scene (Yarborough, 1995). Warm sun-basking areas can be created by adding large, flat stones. Planting "windscreen" shrubs around your garden, such as sweet Azaleas (*Rhododendron aborescens*), can help to reduce prevailing winds and enhance these basking areas.

Another way to encourage butterfly proliferation is to create mud puddles by digging depressions in the soil where water may collect. This helps give butterflies the mineral salts they need from the soil and places to drink, things that plants cannot offer (Yarborough, 1995).

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Monarch butterfly on zinnia flower. Photo by Suzanne DeJohn, National Gardening Association



Butterfly Bush. Photo courtesy of Johnny's Selected Seeds, Winslow, ME



Mountain Mint. Photo courtesy of Johnny's Selected Seeds, Winslow, ME

Butterfly Frenzy

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In close proximity to this moisture-rich area try planting a moisture loving species such as Joe-pye Weed (*Eupatorium purpureum*), which butterflies will flock to because of its nectar-rich blossoms.

To support a butterfly during its life-span, adequate nectar must be available throughout the season. This is done by staggering nectar production relative to chosen plants. As well as a diversity of blooming periods, try to offer dense plantings of varying heights and color to best meet the needs of the local butterfly populations.

Choosing native plants and wildflowers of Vermont is wise because local pollinators will have a history with the local plants. Butterflies will tend to gravitate towards native species rather than unknown foreign species, when given the option (Schappert, 2003). There are several plant species native to the northeast which butterflies, among other pollinators, feed on.

Mountain Mint (*Pycnanthemum muticum*) is a superb herbaceous perennial for this bioregion. It attracts many smaller butterflies during the blooming period, including the Gray Hairstreak, Eastern Tailed-Blue, and Spring Azure. It is able to grow in many soil types, although it prefers rich sandy loam soils with full sunlight and plenty of moisture. Keep in mind that it spreads rigorously by rhizomes, so give this plant adequate room to expand. You can expect Mountain Mint to bloom from midsummer until frost (Ruffin, 2003).

Another fairly tall, late-blooming perennial you might consider incorporating is New England Aster (*Aster novae-angliae*). It ranges from 4-5' tall when fully grown and prefer moist soil with full sunlight. The gardener might consider pruning the growing tips back towards the beginning of the summer in order to promote bushier growth and avoid staking. Since the New England Aster is late-blooming (Mid-August through October), it provides a good nectar source for fall migrants and species such as the Painted Lady, American Lady, and Pearl Crescent (Ruffin, 2003). Not to mention, the final pre-winter surge of rose, pink, and violet it provides the landscape.

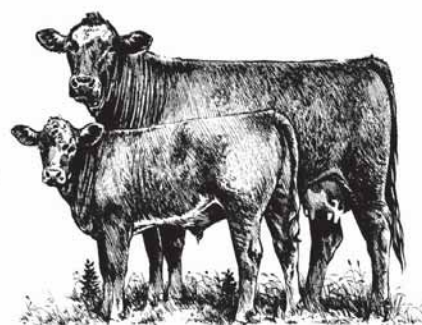
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One of the best butterfly plants is appropriately named Butterfly Weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), which is readily grown from seed and produces bright orange flower clusters. Butterfly Weed requires well-drained soils, full sun, and little water. It hosts the larva of the monarch, while attracting a wide variety of butterflies such as Hairstreaks. Butterfly weed is approximately 2-3' in height, something to take note of when designing your layout. To extend the blooming period, which is regularly June-September, remove dead flowers following senescence (Yarborough, 1995).

Being one of the easiest native lilies to cultivate, Turk's Cap Lily (*Lilium superbum*) is an excellent summer-blooming option. It thrives in moist to wet soil in full or partial sunlight and attracts the marvelous Eastern Tiger Swallowtail and Spicebush Swallowtail (Ruffin, 2003). The red-orange trumpet-like flowers never fail to entice the aforementioned species.

Go out to observe what the butterflies in your area like, before deciding on your garden plan. There are many plants to be utilized beyond the few mentioned here, including many herbs that we use ourselves, like English Lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*) or Oregano (*Origanum laevigatum*). *Salvias* (sages) are also wonderful pollinator plants and come in a wide variety of colors including dark red and indigo blue.

With a few simple plant selections, you can create a frenzy of butterflies in your home garden. By avoiding the use of harmful chemicals and providing nectar-rich plants, water, shelter, and adequate sunlight, you will be doing a great service to these wondrous and aesthetically pleasing creatures. However you approach the task of luring these lovely pollinators to your garden, never forget their integral role in our daily lives. Just remember, if you plant it, they will come.

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