Welcome butterflies to your garden

Source: Richard Durham, extension professor, Department of Horticulture

Light as air, bright as stained glass or creamy as angel wings, butterflies and moths do the important work of pollinating our plants while bringing joy to our gardens. They don’t require a lot from us human caregivers — only a few host plants for the babies, a few nectar plants for the adults, a little water or moist soil, a flat rock for sunning, and they’re happy critters.

The best flowers to plant for adult butterflies are nectar-rich classics. Hybrid plants, while beautiful, are often sterile or don’t provide the largesse of nectar butterflies need. Plant sun-loving, brightly colored plants of all heights to attract the greatest diversity of butterflies and moths to your yard. Perennial plants such as coneflowers, asters, catmint and liatris are good choices. Some annuals that will attract butterflies and bees are lantana, sweet alyssum, sunflowers, zinnias and snapdragons. Most salvias, either annual or perennial, are pollinator magnets. Night flying moths are especially attracted to white flowers, so moonflower vines, white impatiens and nicotiana are good annuals to plant.

Different butterflies are attracted to plantings of various heights. For instance, tiger swallowtails are attracted to the tall Joe Pye weed and New England aster blossoms. Least skippers enjoy low-growing plants like lavender, dianthus and low-growing asters such as Stokes’ aster. Shrubs like viburnum, sweetspire and elderberry are also good options to attract a variety of species.

You will also need to plant some host plants as nurseries for the insects. If you intermingle host plants with nectar plants, you will improve your chances of seeing generations of butterflies in your garden. Milkweed is preferred by Monarch butterflies, because feeding on the plant as caterpillars builds up the toxins in their bodies that make them unpalatable to their enemies. The Eastern tailed-blue butterfly likes to lay its eggs on sweet peas. The hackberry tree is a host tree to many species of butterfly caterpillars. Larvae of the black swallowtail butterfly frequent garden plants of parsley, carrot, dill and fennel—with practice their stripped caterpillars are easy to spot.

Butterflies are cold-blooded and need warmth in the morning. Placing a flat rock in a sunny spot near your flowers can give them the energy they need for a day of foraging. And leaving them a shallow pan of water filled with pebbles or sand or soil will provide them with the water and minerals they need to be healthy. Above all, do not use pesticides in your garden. Most pesticides can harm or kill butterflies and moths, as well as other important pollinators. Even organic pesticides such as neem oil or insect soap can kill them or cause disruptions in their mating or feeding behaviors. The best way to control harmful insects in your garden is to plant for diversity and let nature take care of the problem for you.

For more information on supporting pollinators in your garden, contact the (COUNTY NAME) office of the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service.

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