Making Space for Butterflies

By Christy Shivell for the Appalachian Habitat Alliance

Butterflies are splendid creatures. Whether watching them flit and fly, studying their behavior as they bask and puddle, or observing their amazing transformation, gardeners can derive great satisfaction from having these winged jewels present. Creating a garden that is friendly to butterflies is easy, but it is more than just planting pretty flowers.

Butterflies are insects in the order Lepidoptera, derived from the Greek words lepis and pteron, meaning scale and wing, respectively. They go through 4 distinct life stages in their life cycle: Adult (Imago), Egg, (ovum), Larvae (Caterpillar), and Pupa (chrysalis). This life cycle is important for gardeners to be aware of, in order to shelter and provide for the butterflies at each stage. For example, providing flowers for adults but spraying herbicide to kill caterpillars is self defeating.

Butterfly gardening at its most effective is based on a two fold strategy:

1. Follow practices that protect and promote butterflies at each stage of the life cycle,

2. Provide for their changing needs at various life stages, including growing a wide variety of nectar and host plants for them.

Butterfly Friendly Garden Practices

- Do not use chemicals in the garden. No insecticides, pesticides, herbicides, fungicides. Insecticides work on butterflies, too, and other chemicals may cause them harm, as well.
- Allow "weeds" such as dandelion, clover, and plantain to exist in your lawn. Many of these plants are great nectar and host plants for butterflies.
- Set your mower a little higher, and mow less often. Eggs and larvae living in the lawn will thank you.
- Allow natural areas to grow unmown, providing goldenrods, ironweed, thistle, milkweeds, and a host of other wildflowers to grow. (Birds will thank you, too)
- Allow larvae to feed on host plants. At times, adherence to this policy will require a great deal of tolerance to the damage they inflict.
- Don't be too hasty when it comes to cleaning up brush, removing tall stems from dormant perennials, and removing downed limbs and tree trunks. Butterflies in various stages often overwinter in places such as these.

Providing for All the Needs of Butterflies: Even Monarchs need more that just milkweed to flourish.

• Shelter- Provide shelter from wind and rain by planting tall perennials, shrubs and trees.

• Sunlight- Butterflies love to flit around in large, open areas. A natural prairie is ideal, but your chemical free and clover rich lawn is a good compromise.

• Rocky areas for basking-Butterflies like to bask in the sun to dry their wings and warm themselves.

• Puddles or moist depressions for drinking. Puddle areas contain concentrated minerals that butterflies crave.

• Winter homes: Butterflies can overwinter in crevices in fallen wood. You can also put up a butterfly house, but remember, it will be used in winter, not summer.

Host and Nectar Plants for Butterflies

Many butterflies have an exclusive relationship with one plant or one plant family in their larval stage. Most adult butterflies will nectar at a variety of sources, but research consistently shows that native plants provide the highest quality forage for butterflies and other insects. You may frequently see them feeding on non native species, like butterflybush, but those plants simply do not give them the nutrients they need to thrive and reproduce. The following native genera or species are among the best butterfly plants to incorporate into your landscape.

Phlox	Golden Ragwort	Dogbane
Ironweed	Wild Geranium	Anise Hyssop
Spicebush	Mountain Mint	Bluestar
Passionflower	Pipevine	Native Azaleas
Violet	New Jersey Tea	Asters
Jewel weed	Steeplebush	Sedum
Milkweeds	Summersweet	Joe Pye, Boneset and their
Wild Ginger	Golden Alexanders	relations
Coneflower	Virginia Sweetspire	Nettle
Goldenrod	Coreopsis	Pinks (Silene)
Native Thistle	Bee Balm and other Monarda	Blazing star
Rudbeckia	Culver's Root	Native clematis

…and add to that list about any native tree (*choosing native trees instead of exotic ones can impact hundreds of pollinator species.*