

Attracting Butterflies: Five Steps to Success



1. Before you begin:

Decide from the start how much time, expense and effort you want to invest in your butterfly habitat project. A successful habitat will require more than one season of planting. Do you have the patience for a long-term project? What are you willing to cut down or dig up in order to provide the necessary plants for butterflies? Are you willing to seek out and pay more for native plants, which in the long run will be the most successful on your site? Are you willing to grow a garden free of all insecticides, which means you have to deal with other insects as well as butterflies? Are there neighborhood or city “weed ordinances” that will restrict what you can and cannot do?

2. Discover what you already have:

You can only expect to attract the butterflies that already exist in your area. Begin by surveying: identify and list the butterfly species that visit your yard (either for nectar or laying eggs) during the season. Survey the plants in your yard; some of the best plants for attracting butterflies are native “weeds.”

Go a step further and study the butterflies and their plants in your neighborhood. Can you grow these plants on your site?

3. Know the methods of managing butterfly plants:

There are basically two methods of managing plants to attract butterflies. One is to provide a continuous supply of favorite nectar flowers to attract butterflies (the “pub” method). Another method is to include “preferred” larval food plants to nourish the caterpillars (the “nursery” method). If you truly want to encourage butterflies to linger in your yard, you need to provide both nectar sources and larval plants.

4. Know the feeding requirements of caterpillars:

You will need to know the specific plant each species prefers, where to place and how to grow these plants. Some caterpillars will feed on only one kind of plant. Remember to concentrate first on the food plants of the butterfly species already visiting your yard. Decide what you will do if the caterpillars strip these plants bare & assume that they can. Will you need to plant other things to hide this?

5. Plan around the sun:

Butterflies are sun-loving insects and much of their life’s activity revolves around the warmth of the sun. The majority of plants you need to grow will require full sun for 5 to 6 hours, and the butterflies prefer protection from strong winds.

Although adult butterflies prefer sunny locations for feeding, some caterpillars may require food plants in shaded areas. Luckily, the food plants of some butterflies are trees. Consider yourself lucky if your habitat is large enough to allow shaded and dappled areas with the necessary sunny areas as well.

