



UNIVERSITY OF  
FLORIDA

LEE COUNTY  
EXTENSION  
SERVICE

# Horticulture

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## Butterfly Gardening With Florida Native Plants

Gayle Edwards, Lee County Master Gardener 3-1-03

Attracting butterflies into your yard by incorporating specific plants into your landscape will benefit nature and bring you hours of pleasure. Development and highway mowing have destroyed plants vital for many creatures. You can help by creating a new, native habitat in your own back yard. Butterflies are more common in areas with native plants because, for the most part, these are the plants that caterpillars require for foodplants. Not all flowers are attractive to butterflies, nor do their caterpillars eat the leaves of just any plant. The flowers of our native plants are not as showy or colorful as some of the exotic plants sold to attract butterflies, but our natives are nectar rich and preferred by many species of butterflies. Native plants will require less water and fertilizer and will bring beauty and wildlife to your home. Native plants, just like all plants, require care to be kept attractive in the landscape. Female butterflies are attracted to, and search for, larval plants with tender new growth on which to lay their eggs, so trimming to generate new leaves is a must. The size of your butterfly garden may consist of a large container garden on your patio, larval or host plants added to your landscape, or a large, sunny area with many larval and nectar plants. Someone once said that the right size garden is whatever size you can comfortably maintain and enjoy.

### **SITE LOCATION...**

Butterflies are short-lived so they are very busy nectaring, looking for mates, and laying eggs to reproduce their species. Most require a sunny and open location. An exception is our Florida state butterfly, the Zebra Heliconia, which flies high in the shade, and lays eggs on passion vines. Butterflies need sun to warm them for flight. Heat retentive stones or gravel in a sunny location in your garden will provide a place for the butterflies to attain added warmth on cool days by basking and to assist them in drying after they emerge from their chrysalis.

### **CHEMICALS...**

Pesticides should not be used in or near the butterfly garden. Butterflies are extremely sensitive to chemicals.

### **LARVAL PLANTS...**

If your site is limited, the first requirement, you will want to consider the addition of host or larval plants only. You will also want to plant the larval food of the butterfly species that are the most abundant here in Southwest Florida and therefore the most easily attracted. Some of these larval plants are vines, and if a trellis, fence or arbor is not available, they will happily climb a palm tree or creep along the ground. Butterflies can detect their larval plants from over a mile away. Nectar plants are plentiful in our Florida gardens but the larval plants are what the female butterflies are searching for to deposit their eggs and to feed their caterpillars. Many of the larval plants also provide excellent nectar. Larval plants come in the form of vines, flowers, shrubs, trees or groundcovers and can double as nectar sources, wind breaks and roosts. Garden size permitting, plant as many as possible and see what flutters into your back yard.

### **NECTAR PLANTS....**

The second requirement is plants to use for nectar or food. Nectar contains sugar, proteins and other chemicals. The male milkweed butterflies also seek out pyrrolizidine alkaloids which are used to produce their pheromones. Aster and Borage Family plant groups such as Senecio, Eupatorium and Heliotropium contain pyrrolizidine alkaloids in both the leaves and the foliage. Gener-

ally, plants in the Aster, Mint, Madder, and Vervain families are some of the best butterfly attractors. If you notice plants and weeds that seem to be used often by the butterflies, they are most probably from one of these groups of plants. The Malachite, a butterfly you may see, likes to feed on rotting fruit.

#### COVER....

The third requirement for a successful butterfly garden is cover. You will need mulch, ferns, grasses, and low-growing plants for the caterpillars to retreat to when there is inclement weather; trees and shrubs for the caterpillars to attach their chrysalis to and provide shelter for the butterflies. Butterflies roost at night and in foul weather and require cover for rest and to hide from predators. Caterpillars, when they are ready to pupate, usually leave their host plant and attach the chrysalis to a nearby branch, shrub, or plant, other than their host plant. Try to use as many of the plants from the nectar and larval list as you can for additional cover.

#### WATER...

Butterflies can not drink from a direct water source such as a river, birdbath or saucer of water. Most of their liquid requirements are met by nectar and dew but some do obtain water by “sipping” or “puddling” from wet sand or mud. Artificially providing these sites is usually not successful as the naturally occurring salts are missing. Try a ground level container of damp sand or mud and judge the results for yourself.

#### PLANT SELECTION....

There are books and information sheets written for Florida Butterfly Gardening that recommend native plants but because it is not cost effective to produce a book for a small area such as Southwest Florida, you need to know that all the plants mentioned will not survive in our area, and that you will not see all of the butterflies written about in those books in Southwest Florida. Also, plants listed as popular nectar sources for butterflies in more northerly areas may not attract butterflies in our Southwest Florida. Possibly because of our abundance of flowering plants they have better nectar choices. Another variable is your personal site location. Butterflies have specific habitat preferences as they do larval host preferences. If you live inland on a dry site, you will see different butterflies than someone living on a coastal, wet site. Your type of site and location will determine the plants you will be able to grow and the butterflies you will be able to attract. This will require research, trial and error.

#### IDENTIFY.....

A good way to start learning about our Southwest Florida butterflies is to identify the ones you do see in your location. Learn them one at a time and then plant their larval food. They will become a regular visitor to your garden. Many of the butterflies you see may be using common weeds on your property as their larval food.

#### PREDATORS.....

It is also important to remember that butterflies, their eggs and caterpillars are naturally part of the food chain for birds, spiders, lizards and other insects. The delicate balance of nature is most often disturbed by man not creatures.

FLORIDA NATIVE PLANTS USED AS LARVAL FOOD FOR BUTTERFLIES		
<b>TREES</b>		
COMMON NAME	BOTANICAL NAME	BUTTERFLY
Black Mangrove	Avicennia germinans	Mangrove Buckeye
Blackbead	Pithecellobium	Large Orange Sulphur
Cat's Claw	Pithecellobium unguis-cati	Large Orange Sulphur
Hercules Club	Zanthoxylum clava-hercules	Giant Swallowtail
Jamaican Caper	Capparis cynophallophora	Florida White
Red Bay	Persea borbonia	Palamedes and Spicebush Swallowtails
Strangler Fig	Ficus aurea	Ruddy Daggerwing
Sweetbay Magnolia	Magnolia virginiana	Eastern Tiger Swallowtail
Torchwood	Amyris elemifera	Giant Swallowtail
Wax Myrtle	Myrica crifera	Red-Banded Hairstreak
Wild Lime	Zanthoxylum fagara	Giant Swallowtail
Willow	Salix sp.	Viceroy
<b>SHRUBS</b>		
Bahama Cassia	Cassia chapmanii	Cloudless Sulphur, Orange-Barred Sulphur Sleepy Orange
Carolina Aster	Aster carolinianus	Pearl Crescent
Paw-Paws	Asimina reticulata	Zebra Swallowtail
Plumbago Scandens	Plumbago Scandens	Cassius Blue
Privet Cassis	Cassia ligustrina	Cloudless Sulphur, Orange-Barred Sulphur Sleepy Orange
<b>Vines</b>		
Corky-stemmed Passionvine	Passiflora suberosa	Gulf Fritillary, Zebra Heliconian, Variegated
Maypop	Passiflora incarnata	Fritillary and Julia
White Vine	Sarcostemma Clausum	Queen, Soldier and Monarch
<b>Wild Flowers and Weeds</b>		
Aligator Flag	Thalia geniculata	Canna Skipper
Beggarweeds	Desmodium sp.	Gray Hairstreak and Dorantes Longtail skipper
Dicliptera assurgens		Cuban Crescent
False Nettle	Behmeria cylindrica	Red Admiral
Green Shrimp Plant	Blechum brownei	Malachite
Lippia (Fog Fruit)	Phyla Nodiflora	Cuban Crescent and Common Buckeye
Partridge Pea	Chamaecrista Fasciculata	Little Sulphur, Cloudless Sulphur
Pencil Flower	Stylosanthes hamata	Barred Yellow
Peppergrass	Lepidium	Checkered White & Great Southern White
Saltwort	Batis maritima	Great Southern White
Spanish Needles	Bidens Alba	Dainty Sulphur
Twinflower	Dyschoriste oblongifolia	Little Sulphur and Common Buckeye
Water Dropwort	Oxypolis filiformis	Eastern Black Swallowtail
Water Hemlock	Cicuta curtissii / Mexicana	Eastern Black Swallowtail
Water Hyssop	Bocopa monnieri	White Peacock
Wild Petunia	Ruellia caroliniensis	Common Buckeye and Malachite
Yellow Thistle	Cirsium horridulum	Little Metalmark and Painted Lady

**FLORIDA NATIVE PLANTS USED AS NECTAR PLANTS FOR BUTTERFLIES**

COMMON NAME	BOTANICAL NAME	FAMILY
Bloodberry	Cordia globosa	Borage
Blue Porterweed	Stachytarpheta jamaicensis	Vervain
Bushy Aster	Aster Dumosus	Aster
Coral Honeysuckle	Lonicera sempervirens	Caprifolia
Coreopsis	Coreopsis leavenworthii	Aster
Dotted Horsemint	Monarda punctata	Mint
Dune Sunflower	Helianthus debilis	Aster
False Dragonhead	Physosteia purpurea	Mint
Fiddlewood	Citharexylum fruticosum	Verbena
Firebush	Hamelia Patens	Madder
Gaillardia	Gaillardia pulchella	Aster
Ironweed	Vernonia gigantea	Aster
Jacquemontia	Jacquemontia pentanthos	Convolvulva
Mist Flower	Ageratum Littorale	Aster
Necklace Pod	Sophora tomentosa	Vervain
Rudbeckia	Rudbeckia hirta	Aster
Scorpion's Tail	Heliotropium angiospermum	Heliotrope-Borage
Sea Oxeye Daisy	Borrichia frutescens	Aster
Seaside Goldenrod	Solidago sempervirens	Aster
Silk Grass	Pityopsis graminifolia	Aster
Tampa Verbena	Verbena tapensis	Vervain
Tropical Sage	Salvia coccinea	Mint
Wild Coffee	Psychotria sp.	Madder
Wild Sage	Lantana involucrata	Vervain
Yellowtop	Flaveria linearis	Aster

**What's missing?**

Two common butterflies, the Monarch and the Polydamas or Goldrim Swallowtail, Require the use of non-native larval plants in Lee County.

Scarlet Milkweed (*Asclepias curassavica*) is the non-native milkweed commonly used to support the resident monarch population in this area.

Pipevine (*Aristolochia* sp.) is the non-native host plant for the Polydamas and Pipevine Swallowtails. There are several varieties available.

Red Pentas (*lanceolata*) is an established butterfly favorite. Do not use the dwarf varieties as they have had all the nectar bred out of them and are useless for nectar sources. Ask for "Tall Red Pentas".

*This is not meant to be a complete list of Florida native nectar or larval plants.*

Prepared by Gayle Edwards, Lee County Master Gardener 10-14-04