



Butterfly Gardening in Weaverville



Butterflies are a welcome part of the gardens they visit. Attracting many of them to your garden is easy once you meet their basic needs for food, shelter, a place for their young and a garden managed in a safe, sustainable way. Here are some tips from the National Wildlife Federation, with additions specific to Weaverville, to help you get started.

Provide food for adults

Different kinds of butterflies have different food preferences. Most choose nectar from their favorite flowers although some seek out sap, rotting fruit, carrion and dung. The amount of nectar available in your garden determines whether butterflies will stay there or flit on.

Butterfly-attracting plants are found in two groups: native plants that naturally grow in our area and that were here before settlers arrived, and cultivated plants that were brought here from other regions by people. The use of plants native to western North Carolina is strongly recommended because our butterfly species are best adapted to natives and because use of native plants is a keystone of sustainable landscaping. However, some non-natives can be of value to butterflies and other insects, especially in the case of nectar plants. If you do use cultivated plants as nectar plants in your butterfly garden, you should use only annual species because these species are unlikely to become invasive.



Plant good nectar sources in the sun and keep them healthy!

To lure the greatest number of butterflies to your garden your nectar source plants should get full sun from mid-morning to mid-afternoon. The warmth of the sun promotes the greatest nectar production in flowers. And lots of nectar means lots of butterflies. Usually the best nectar is produced at midday and is the sweetest when the sun is shining, the temperature is rising and the humidity is falling. You may notice butterflies using certain plants in one part of the day and then switching to others. That's because nectar production varies.

The type and condition of the soil in your garden effects nectar production too. Try for soil that is loose and has organic matter like decomposed compost or composted manure from cows, worms, etc. If plants get too dry nectar production stops so mulch your garden to conserve water.

If sun is limited in your landscape, try adding butterfly nectar sources to the vegetable garden.



Provide shelter and basking areas

Butterflies need protection from strong wind while feeding. If this is a problem in your yard you can break up the wind flow by planting trees and shrubs. If these are also good butterfly plants such as spicebush they will serve two purposes. Lattice panels or tall-growing perennials or annuals also work.

Some of our Weaverville butterflies like the American Lady, Red Admiral and Mourning Cloak spend the winter tucked away behind loose bark, in narrow cracks of buildings or in hollows of post and trees. When cleaning up the gardens for winter leave these resting places if possible. You can also tack rough cedar boards or slabs of bark in protected places on fences or walls. Place the boards vertically with one side not completely nailed down so the butterfly can squeeze inside.

Butterflies require some heat to begin operations. They can't fly well until their body temperature is at least 82 degrees F. To reach that temperature they must absorb heat from the sun or their surroundings. They can do this by basking. Many choose a rock, a large leaf or the ground.

You can provide a basking area by placing a decorative log or rock in a more open area of the border among the plants. A sack of pine needles or other freshly fallen leaves spread thickly over a 3'x5' area, with a rock or log works quite well. The dark leaves soak up heat and warm the butterfly from below as the sun warms from above. Rock walls and patios are also good basking spots.

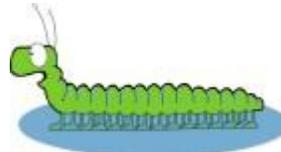
Basking areas that face either east or west get butterflies going earlier and keep them feeding later which increases their lives.



No to insecticides and bug zappers!

Learn to tolerate a few holes in leaves and flowers and a low number of pests in your flowerbeds. These won't keep butterflies from your garden. Bug zappers and insecticides such as malathion, Sevin, and diazinon are marketed to kill insects. Since butterflies are insects don't use these materials in or near the butterfly garden or better, anywhere on your property. Keep in mind "benign" insecticides, such as *Bacillus thuringiensis*, are lethal to butterflies in the caterpillars stage,

Even insecticides made from plants are potent and shouldn't be used indiscriminately. If you feel you must use them be careful and apply them only to the pest-infected portions of the plants. Leave on plants only long enough to kill pests and then thoroughly wash the plants with a soft dousing from the water hose.



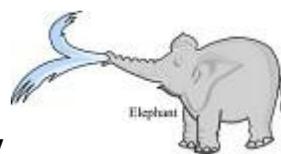
Feed butterfly caterpillars.

If you don't "grow" caterpillars, there will be no adults. Bringing caterpillar foods into your garden can greatly increase your chances of attracting unusual and uncommon butterflies, while giving you yet another reason to plant an increasing variety of native plants. In many cases, caterpillars of a species feed on a very limited variety of plants. Most butterfly caterpillars never cause the leaf damage we associate with some moth caterpillars such as bagworms, tent caterpillars, or gypsy moths.

Many caterpillar food plants are downright weeds. You may not want to feature these at the border front, but maybe some of them could be given space in a back corner. Try thinking of them as the McDonalds for future butterflies. Host plants often have a chomped on look – the mark of a successful selection -- so placing them in a discreet corner or mixing them in with other plants that aren't so tasty may work best.

It is important to include regionally native plants in your garden. This helps counteract the effects of development and gives you more opportunity to observe the amazing diversity found in the world of butterfly babies. For a list of native species that support butterfly caterpillars, see [Butterfly Host Plants for Western NC](#).

An interesting note: Host plants attract butterflies living a mile or less from the plants.



Add moisture for the thirsty

Water doesn't interest all butterflies, but enough kinds look for it to make it worth providing. A clay plant saucer filled with river stones and gravel then filled with water is easy and effective. Be sure the tops of the stones are exposed for perches for the butterflies. Place it in a slightly shaded area to slow evaporation. The butterflies that appreciate moisture, like Red-spotted purples and Monarchs will learn where it is and become repeat visitors.

If you use manure in your flowerbeds, pile some in a sunny out of the way spot where it can be watered often. A plastic garbage can lid placed in a shallow hole then filled with a mixture of dirt and manure and wet thoroughly would be even better. The mixture should be as wet as a really moist sponge.

Keep the mixture well moistened but don't keep it soaking wet. Butterflies prefer a more solid footing as they line up along its edges. Some butterflies like Red Admirals are drawn like a magnet to the liquid produced, which has chemicals called amino acids they need to thrive. It isn't unusual to have a dozen or more partying around the edges. These groups are known as "puddling clubs" and most of the "puddlers" are male. Since they're on the ground leave enough clear space – 3'x5' – so they can safely take off easily if danger approaches.



Garden planning tips

Decide where you'd like your garden to be. Pick the sunniest area possible for your nectar plants. *Beds 6' to 8' wide work better than narrower beds.* That gives you plenty of space for annuals and perennials with room for them to spread. Try to locate the garden where you will see it often so you'll get maximum enjoyment from your efforts. Be sure to include a place in your plan for a place to sit and enjoy your winged visitors and bright flowers.

Include open areas of grass, low groundcover (our native violets make great ground cover and are also butterfly host plants) or paving. Butterflies like to have open space for flight and access to sun. Plan for groups or areas of trees or shrubs to act as shelter plants. These provide refuge from high winds and driving rain. Use as many native, butterfly-attracting plants as possible.

If you have a naturally wooded area on your lot or adjoin a wooded area you can attract butterflies that are seen less often. If you wish you can enhance that area by adding plants like flowering dogwood, spicebush and the native perennial toothwort.

Keep in mind that butterflies don't like little bits or this and that. They like large masses of the same color and fragrance. Butterflies will feed in such groupings until the flowering period ends. Although butterflies respond to many colors, as a general rule purple seems to be a top choice.

The following web site has an excellent two-minute video on getting a new garden ready to plant: <http://video.about.com/landscaping/Garden-prep.htm>. The advice given will work for gardens in sun as well as in shade. They suggest you dig the soil to a depth of two feet. That isn't necessary. If you can work your soil to a depth of 8"-12" you'll be fine. If your soil is REALLY bad you may want to garden in a raised bed. If so break up the top couple of inches and then add 8"-10" of good soil. You will probably want to put some sort of retaining wall to keep the mounded soil in place.

Once your new plants are in don't forget to keep them watered until they are well established. It takes a year or two for plants to settle into their new homes.



Almost instant butterfly garden

If you're in a hurry to welcome visiting butterflies or have little space for gardening you can use containers filled with annual flowers. The best spots are open protected locations with sun. An area near a water faucet is handy for caring for your pots.

Places such as deck railings, on steps, patios, sunny house or garage walls or a corner that needs immediate beautifying are all good candidates. Plants like hibiscus, lantana, verbena, single flowered red and pink geraniums, purslane [*Portulaca oleracea sativa* also known as moss rose], Madagascar periwinkle, single flowered marigolds, zinnias, multiflora petunias and purple-flowered sweet alyssum are excellent choices. In more shaded area impatiens can be used. These non-native annual plants are a good temporary solution until your natives are established.

You may include pots of food plants for caterpillars too. Parsley, fennel and dill are pretty and work well in pots.

A word of caution: Don't move plants about once they're placed to your satisfaction. Butterflies are creatures of habit. Once a butterfly has found a food source, it comes back to it regularly for days. Pots in groups of the same color and kind of plant are another good idea. Butterflies like a lot of the same thing. And if one of your pots does poorly it can be moved to the back of the group without changing the group look. Butterflies are leery of change and will feel more comfortable with this system.



Be patient

It usually takes a while for your new plants to settle in, begin blooming, and producing good nectar. It will also take time for butterflies to find you.

By Sue Vrooman (updated by Alicia Hulse)