Attracting Butterflies to the Garden

Calling all butterfly lovers! The Lower Rio Grande Valley (LRGV) is a prime gardening location for attracting lovely lepidopteran (butterflies). The great diversity of native plant life provides continuous flowering (and therefore continuous nectar production) for hungry butterflies. Many butterfly species populate the LRGV year round and many more migrate here for the winter. Not only are the majority of the butterflies of North America known in Texas, but Cameron County is actually the extreme northern boundary for some Central American species.

Butterflies are very picky creatures when it comes to plants. The adult butterfly spends most of its time nectaring or looking for nectar sources. The following is a list of the preferred nectar plants.

- Low Croton
- Shrubby Blue Sage or Mejorana
- White Brush or Chaparro Blanco
- Texas Lantana or Hierba de Cristo
- Desert Lantana or Negrita
- Oregano or Redbud Lippia
- Tropical Sage
- Milkweed and other aesclpias
- Manando or Lemon horsemint
- Pink mint
- Shrimp plant
- Blue Mistflower
- Rio Grande Abutilon
- Woody Indian Mallow
- Drummond’s Turk’s Cap
- Fiddlewood
- Wild Asters or Hierba del Marrano
- Sunflowers
- Texas Kidneywood
- Frogfruit
- Mexican Caesalpinia
- Passion vines

Don’t forget some of the best nectar sources are trees such as Honey Mesquite, Anacahuite or Wild Olive, Anaqua, Texas Ebony, Retama, Granjeno. These trees also provide shelter from strong wind as well as a place for butterflies to roost at night. Some butterflies such as the Giant Swallowtail prefer to roam in the darker shade of the Ebony tree.

To have butterflies in the garden on a regular basis you must also plant the food plants for the caterpillars. Each butterfly lays its eggs on a particular family of plants known as larval host plants. For example the Black Swallowtail
lays its eggs on members of the carrot family - Fennel, Dill, Parsley, Queen Anne’s Lace. The hungry caterpillars will eat most of the leaves of its host plant. Don’t panic when you see a decimated plant. It will recover!

**Butterflies and their host plants:**

**Monarch and Queen**  
Milkweed and other aesclepias

**Bordered Patch, Dainty Sulphur**  
*Sunflower Family:* Asters and Cowpen Daisy

**American Painted Lady**  
Sunflower Family, Desert Lantana

**Giant Sulphur, Pixie**  
Texas Ebony, Tenaza

**Empress Louisa**  
Sugar Hackberry

**Metalmark**  
Mexican Caesalpinia

**Tropical Leafwing, Goatweed**  
*Spurge Family:* Low Croton

**Mexican Dogface, Reakirts’ Blue**  
Texas Kidneywood

**Checkered White**  
*Mustard Family:* Peppergrass, Tansy Mustard

**Cassius Blue, White Patch**  
Barbados Cherry or Manzanita

**Theona Checkerspot**  
Cenizo

**Cuban Crescentspot**  
Shrimp plant, Ruellia (wild petunia)

**Malachite, Fatima, Buckeye**  
*Acanthus Family:* Dicliptera, Ruellia, Runyon’s Water Lily,

**Giant Swallowtail**  
*Native Citrus Family:* Colima, Tickle Tongue, Texas Torchwood, Barreta, Jopoy

**Cloudless Sulphur**  
*Legume Family:* Sennas, Retama, Texas Kidneywood, Bearded Dalea, Honey Mesquite, Powder puff

**Gulf Fritillary**  
Blue Passionvine

**Blue Wing**  
Adelicia vaiseyi

**Tawny Emperor, Snout, Mourning Cloak**  
*Elm Family:* Granjeno, Cedar Elm

**White Peacock**  
Frog Fruit, Ruellia
Pygmy Blue
   Horse purslane
Julia, Zebra Longwing, Crimson-Patched Longwing
   Yellow Passionflower Vine
Buckeye
   Snapdragon Vine
Janis Patch
   Acanthus Family: Wright Anisacanth or muicle
Red Admiral
   Nettle Family: Florida Pellitory, Stinging Weed
Amymone
   Brush Noseburn
Lyside, Grey Hairstreak
   Caltrop Family: Guayacan
Pipevine Swallowtail
   Dutchman’s Pipe Family (woody vines with pungent roots)
Great Southern White
   Caper Family: Peppergrass, Clammyweed

To get started plant several fennel plants for the Black Swallowtail to lay eggs on. Lantana and Drummond’s Turk’s Cap will provide good nectar sources. Be sure to ask for the native Drummond’s Turk’s Cap. The larger variety is not native to the LRGV, and the flower is too large for the butterflies to use.

Another “quickie” start is to plant milkweed. The monarch migrates through our area between late September and November. Some stragglers will hang around until January or the first very cold front. The Monarchs will nectar and lay their eggs on the milkweed plant. They will return on their way north during March, but usually do not stick around long during spring.

A word of warning on pesticides: butterflies are insects and pesticides will wipe out the eggs, larvae, and adults. There are natural ways to control pests and these are described in detail in Geyata Ajilvsgi’s book Butterfly Gardening for the South. This book has excellent information on butterfly gardening. Another good book for butterfly identification is A Field Guide to Butterflies of Texas by Brownsville native Raymond Neck.

Unlike birds, butterflies don’t need water. They do like mud, or damp sand, and some species prefer rotting fruit. The butterflies acquire needed nutrients from the amino acids in these mixtures. So throw those old bananas out in the garden and you’ll have some happy butterflies!

(Sources: Native Plant Project, P.O. Box 1433 Edinburg, TX. 78540. Valley Nature Center, 301 South Border Ave., Weslaco, TX. The Sabal, Native Plant Project, P.O. Box 1433 Edinburg, TX. 78540- Joe Ideker, editor).
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