

## 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 aesclipias
- 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

Adelia vaseyi

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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