

Garden Patch
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FOR USE IN SUMMER

Help Butterflies Beat The Odds

We all know that Texas likes doing things on a grand scale, so it should be no surprise that the Lone Star State boasts more native butterfly species than any other state – more than 400. This



bounty is due to the state’s ecological diversity. The mountains in far west Texas, for example, harbor different species from those in the piney woods of East Texas or the subtropical Gulf Coast. In addition to resident butterflies, many more species regularly migrate from Mexico, such as the monarch.

Thanks to the long, growing season experienced in many Texas regions, numerous native and adapted plants thrive in the state. Gardeners easily provide food and shelter to satisfy numerous species with names as colorful as the butterflies themselves — clouded sulphur, purple hairstreak, Gulf fritillary, hackberry emperor, red admiral, southern dogface, painted lady, viceroy, zebra swallowtail and many more.

Attracting specific butterflies begins with growing the particular host plant upon which they lay their eggs. Unfortunately, some host plants are in danger of disappearing because they are perceived as weeds. Many are mowed or sprayed with herbicides. These host plants include native passion vines, milkweeds, asters, hackberries, frogfruit and sunflowers. Females sometimes die if a host plant is not found. Only five in 500 eggs will become adults due to harsh weather, predators, disease, pesticides, etc.

To survive, butterflies have to beat the odds. Finding water and nectar sources is essential. Some plants produce more nectar than others and butterflies instinctively know which ones to visit. These natives include lantana, verbena, Turk's cap, milkweed, butterfly weed, scarlet sage, sunflower and grasses such as bluestem and switchgrass.

About 20 swallowtail species inhabit the state. The pipevine swallowtail is abundant throughout Texas, frequenting gardens, fields and trees. Its caterpillars feed on pipevine (Dutchman's pipe), a plant that harbors a toxin that makes the butterflies taste particularly bad to predators, thus offering protection. Several species mimic pipevine's appearance, but pipevines are distinguished by the single row of orange circles on their undersides and a single row of white spots on their wings' top sides near the edges. Adult males are black with iridescent blue hind wings. Females are lighter blue or all black.

Adult swallowtails feed on the nectar from flowers of thistles, phlox, lantana, verbenas, Mexican sunflower and more. These pollinators generally prefer pink, purple and orange flowers.

For answers to your horticulture questions, please call the Texas AgriLife Extension, Hood County at 817-579-3280 or go online to visit lakegranburymastergardeners.org.

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