



Gardening for Butterflies

A Painted Lady Butterfly glides by, its marbled orange and black wings floating past the lush red of Bee Balm. A patch of mud attracts a host of dazzling swallowtails. Nearly 300 species of butterflies inhabit Canada, some cloaked in brilliant colours, others less noticeable. The presence of these graceful creatures in our gardens is a blessing of vibrancy and beauty.

THE LIVES OF BUTTERFLIES

Butterflies have four stages in their life cycle. In the first stage, a butterfly starts out as a tiny egg. From this egg emerges a caterpillar, or larva, which spends most of its time eating and growing. To allow for this rapid growth, it sheds its skin several times. Once full size, it will begin to form a pupa or chrysalis. Although sometimes referred to as the “resting stage,” this phase is actually a time of great change. The caterpillar is transforming into an adult butterfly, which emerges, dries its wings and flies away.

Butterflies survive the winter by either migrating, as in the case of the Monarch, or by going into a dormant state. Most butterflies that spend the winter here do so as caterpillars (larvae). Some butterfly species, however, overwinter as eggs, pupae or even adults. Butterflies that overwinter as adults, such as the Mourning Cloak, use tree cavities, wood piles or other sheltered spots to pass the winter season.

Butterflies are dependent on outside sources of heat for warming up, so sunshine is very important. If the temperature gets too low, below about 16°C, butterflies are unable to fly. Midday on sunny days is their most active period while cool overcast days see few butterflies in flight.

Caterpillars are quite particular about their food choices. Some are able to eat only a certain type of plant or are limited to one plant species. The Monarch caterpillar, for example, will only eat plants of the milkweed family and without these plants is unable to survive. The presence or absence of a butterfly’s caterpillar or larval food plant(s), therefore, is a determining factor in its ability to survive.

Many butterflies, especially the swallowtails, are active “mud-puddlers.” This means that they gather in areas of wet ground or mud to acquire essential nutrients. Some butterflies will also feed on rotting fruit, animal manure and even carrion.

The use of pesticides can take a serious toll on butterfly populations. Herbicides deplete the landscape of “weeds” essential to their survival. Insecticides aimed at pest species can kill off butterflies and their larvae. Even some “organic” treatments, such as *Bacillus thuringiensis var. kurstaki* (Btk), can harm butterfly larvae.

Adult butterflies generally require good nectar sources. Some extensively hybridized flowers, such as certain roses, have lost much of their ability to produce nectar. Transforming the landscape with manicured lawns and exotic vegetation limits the food available to butterflies.

By understanding the needs of butterflies and accommodating them in our gardens, we can make urban areas more inviting to these beautiful creatures.

CREATE A BUTTERFLY HAVEN

To welcome butterflies to your garden, consider the following tips:

- Choose a sunny spot that is sheltered from prevailing winds.
- Plant a diversity of blooms to attract the greatest variety of butterflies.
- If the area you have to work with is limited, try filling a few containers with some nectar-rich flowers.
- Select native flowers abundant in nectar rather than exotic blooms bred for showiness.
- Include a mixture of plants that will provide blooms from spring through fall.
- Add multiples of each plant to better catch the attention of butterflies.
- Add the larval food plants of butterflies common to your area and plant a lot so there is enough to share.
- Provide essential nutrients for mud-puddling butterflies with a muddy spot, created with the overflow of an air conditioner.
- Satisfy the thirst of butterflies on hot summer days by supplying water in a shallow dish or bird bath with half-submerged stones as perches.
- Pesticides are a butterfly’s worst enemy. If absolutely necessary, apply only organic pesticides sparingly and selectively after sundown, when most butterflies are inactive.
- Create basking spots for butterflies by placing a few flat stones in sunny, sheltered locations.
- Allow a corner of your garden to go a bit wild. Leaf litter, fallen logs or brush piles allow adult butterflies a safe place to hibernate.
- Leave garden cleanup until spring to avoid destroying the pupae of butterflies that overwinter on plant stems. Allow leaf litter to remain on beds wherever possible to protect species that overwinter among the leaves.
- Add some night-blooming flowers, such as evening primrose, scarlet gaura, prairie four o’clocks and phlox, to attract night-flying moths.