Frequently Asked Questions about Butterfly Gardens

1. Where should I locate the butterfly garden?

Butterflies generally feed only in sunny areas, so establish the butterfly garden in areas that get full sun from midmorning to the middle of the afternoon. A minimum of at least six hours of sun is recommended.

2. What will I need to add to the landscape to attract butterflies?

In planning a garden to attract butterflies, it’s important to choose plants that will provide food for the larvae and also nectar plants for the adults. There are four stages in a butterfly’s life cycle: egg, larva, pupa, and adult. It is important to provide plants for each stage of the life cycle.

A puddling bowl provides both water and nutrients for butterflies.
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Provide a water source in a shallow birdbath with sand at the bottom. Keep the sand damp, but do not overfill as butterflies cannot land in open water. In nature, you will see butterflies gathering around mud puddles which supply not only water, but natural salts and nutrients in the soil that butterflies require to encourage breeding. This is known as “puddling.”

Placing flat rocks in the sun throughout the garden provides a place for the butterflies to land and soak up much needed heat from the warm stone.

Optional: There are butterfly feeders that are commercially available. Choose ones that are red and yellow in color. Homemade nectar can be made by boiling four parts water and dissolving one part sugar and let it completely cool. The nectar may be stored in the refrigerator for up to a week. An easy butterfly feeder can be made from a red, orange or yellow sponge. Cut the rectangular sponge into four pieces, put a hole at the top of each piece and run a piece of twine for hanging through the hole. Soak the sponges in the cooled sugar water. Hang the feeder four to six inches above the tallest nectar flowers. Soak the sponges every few days to keep them from drying out. Butterflies also are attracted by overripe fruit such as strawberries, oranges, peaches, and bananas to name a few. Slice the fruit and place it in a shallow dish. Sprinkle either fruit
juice or water on the fruit to keep it moist. Replace the fruit when it becomes moldy or dries out.

3. Is it acceptable to use pesticides in and around the butterfly garden?

Say no to insecticides! Insecticides such as Malathion, Sevin or various synthetic pyrethroids or neonicotinoids, to name a few, are toxic to butterflies. Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*), such as Thuricide or Dipel, is lethal to caterpillars.

4. Can I buy and release butterflies?

Releasing store bought butterflies is a no-no. They can spread diseases to the native butterfly population. They can also interbreed, causing genetic problems or interference with the natural instinct for migration patterns. Usually the exotic butterflies die quickly.

5. What plant species do you recommend for South Carolina gardens?

*Parsley* (*Petroselinum crispum* var. *neapolitanum*) is an excellent host plant for butterfly larvae.

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*Food for larvae*: Coriander, Dill, Fennel, Milkweed, Parsley, Oregano, and Sage. Use multiple species of plants for the butterflies to lay eggs on and for use as a food source for the larvae. During the larval or caterpillar stage, the caterpillar will double its weight over two times in a day, so be sure to plant some of the plants your use and some for the butterflies.
Butterfly Milkweed (*Asclepias tuberosa*) is an important nectar source for migrating Monarch butterflies.

Queen Anne’s Lace (*Daucus carota*) is also known as Wild Carrot, and is both a food for butterfly larvae and nectar for adults.

**Wildflowers:** Aster, Daisy, Goldenrod, Ironweed, Joe Pye Weed, Milkweed -- especially Orange Butterfly Milkweed, Passion Flower, Queen’s Anne Lace, and False Indigo. Milkweed is an especially important food source for Monarch Butterflies to feed on during the fall migration.

**Annuals:** Ageratum, Cosmos, Crimson Clover, Gomphrena, Marigold, Melampodium, Mexican Petunia (also known as Ruellia, which can be perennial in some areas of the state), Mexican Sunflower, Nasturtium, Pentas, Salvia, Sunflower, and Zinnia.
Purple Coneflowers (*Echinacea purpurea*) are easy care cornerstones for butterfly gardens, and attract many species of butterflies such as the Eastern Tiger Swallowtail.
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**Perennials:** Bee Balm, Black Eyed Susan, Coreopsis, Daylily, Dianthus, Dutch White Clover, Gaillardia, Goldenrod, Lantana (both annual and perennial), Lobelia, Penstemon, Phlox, Purple Coneflower, Salvia, Scabiosa, Shasta Daisy, Stokesia, Verbena, Veronica, and Yarrow.

Buckeye (*Aesculus pavia*) is one of the earliest blooming nectar sources for butterflies.
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‘Don’s Variegated’ Native Azalea (*Rhododendron austrinum ‘Don’s Variegated’*) have nectar filled tubular shaped flowers to attract butterflies in the early spring.
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**Shrubs:** Abelia, Azaleas -- especially native varieties, Buckeye, Butterfly Bush, Buttonbush, Clethra, Fothergilla, Itea, Rose of Sharon, Sassafras, Spiraea, and Viburnum.

**Other Interesting Facts about Butterflies**

Did you also know that a butterfly’s nose is in its feet? They have receptors in their feet, legs and antennae. Plant flowers that are flat-topped, clustered or have short flower tubes so butterflies can land or perch on in order to feed. Butterflies are attracted to flowers that are red, yellow, orange, pink and purple. Choose nectar and pollen rich wildflowers, annuals, perennials, and shrubs in successional bloom so the nectar will be continuously available. Use native plants whenever possible as they have coevolved with butterflies and are codependent on each other.
Did you know butterflies see in bright, ultraviolet colors such as red, yellow, and purple? These bright colors signal that the flowers have sugary water and nectar for the butterflies to feed on. They also use the UV light when finding a mate. Not only do butterflies provide everyone with beauty in the garden, they are also important pollinators.

For more information on butterfly gardening, see EIIS/BB-2, *Butterfly Gardening*.

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