

# Butterfly Gardening

Pollinators are a vital part of a healthy environment.

Butterflies are a beautiful part of our gardens.

Flowers that provide nectar and caterpillar hostplants can be grown in almost any garden, and will help butterflies.



Western tiger swallowtail drinking nectar from milkweed.

Photograph © Russell Wood

Like beautiful flowers, butterflies are gems when you find them flying, feeding, or basking in your backyard. They come in a range of sizes and colors and, depending upon the species, show up at different times of year—even in the winter.

To create a landscape that is inviting for butterflies you should consider their life stories. They begin as eggs, hatch into caterpillars that eat plants, spend time as a chrysalis, and, eventually, transform into winged adults that flit around looking for food, mates, and places to lay new eggs. During each of these stages butterflies have very different needs. The more of these needs you can supply, the greater the chance that your backyard will become a home for butterflies.

This fact sheet will help you provide the nectar flowers and caterpillar hostplants that these beautiful creatures need. It also contains suggestions on what else you can do to make the landscape around us—from small urban backyards to large natural areas—better for butterflies.

For more information, visit our web site, [www.xerces.org](http://www.xerces.org), where you will find other fact sheets and more detailed guidelines on how to enhance habitat for pollinators. You'll also find information about the *Pollinator Conservation Handbook* and *Butterfly Gardening. Creating Summer Magic in Your Garden*.

Written by  
Mace Vaughan



**The Xerces Society  
for Invertebrate  
Conservation**

4828 SE Hawthorne  
Blvd.,  
Portland, OR 97215  
503-232 6639

[www.xerces.org](http://www.xerces.org)

## Caterpillar Food: Hostplants

The caterpillars of each species of butterfly has its own, limited menu of plants upon which it will dine. Female butterflies lay their eggs on or near these plants and will be attracted to your backyard if you supply their hostplants. To start with, grow hostplants for the more common butterflies you already see flying through your property and then branch out as you learn more. The list below includes native and non-native hostplants to consider planting in your garden.

Aspen, poplar ( <i>Populus</i> )	many species	Rose ( <i>Rosa</i> )	mourning cloak
Bleeding heart ( <i>Dicentra</i> )	Parnassians	Sagebrush ( <i>Artemisia</i> )	swallowtails, painted lady
Clover ( <i>Trifolium</i> )	sulphurs, blues	Snowberry ( <i>Symphocarpus</i> )	checkerspots
Globemallow ( <i>Sphaeralcea</i> )	painted ladies, skippers	Spirea ( <i>Spirea</i> )	many species
Grasses and sedges	skippers	Thistle ( <i>Cirsium</i> )	painted ladies, crescents
Lupines ( <i>Lupinus</i> )	blues	Violets ( <i>Viola</i> )	fritillaries
Milk vetch ( <i>Astragalus</i> )	blues, hairstreaks	Vetch ( <i>Vicia</i> )	sulphurs, blues
Milkweed ( <i>Asclepias</i> )	monarch	Wild lilac ( <i>Ceanothus</i> )	hairstreaks, duskywings
Oak ( <i>Quercus</i> )	hairstreaks, duskywings	Willow ( <i>Salix</i> )	many species
Penstemon ( <i>Penstemon</i> )	checkerspots, buckeye	Yellowrocket ( <i>Barbarea</i> )	orange tips, whites

## Adult Food: Nectar, Fruit, and Sap

Adult butterflies need sugar to fuel their search for mates and egg-laying sites. The main source of sugar is nectar from flowers. However, some butterflies, such as the mourning cloak, also get sugars from rotten fruit or the sap leaking from wounded trees. By providing flowering plants or plates of rotting fruit (like peaches, melons, or bananas) many of these beautiful insects will be attracted to your yard. Here is a selection of plants to consider growing in your garden.

Aster ( <i>Aster</i> )	Milkweed ( <i>Asclepias</i> )
Bee balm ( <i>Monarda</i> )	Penstemon ( <i>Penstemon</i> )
Beggar-ticks ( <i>Bidens</i> )	Pincushion flower ( <i>Scabiosa</i> )
Black-eyed Susan ( <i>Rudbeckia</i> )	Purple coneflower ( <i>Echinacea</i> )
Daisies ( <i>Chrysanthemum</i> )	Sagebrush ( <i>Artemisia</i> )
Elderberry ( <i>Sambucus</i> )	Spirea ( <i>Spirea</i> )
Goldenrod ( <i>Solidago</i> )	Stonecrop ( <i>Sedum</i> )
Joe-pye weed ( <i>Eupatorium</i> )	Sunflowers ( <i>Helianthus</i> )
Lavender ( <i>Lavandula</i> )	Thistle ( <i>Cirsium</i> )
Blazing-star ( <i>Liatris</i> )	Yarrow ( <i>Achillea</i> )

Adult butterflies need to be warm in order to fly. Therefore, nectar flowers and larval host plants should be grown in an open, sunny area that is protected from the wind by large shrubs, a hedgerow, a fence, or some other windbreak. You also could provide butterflies with large, flat rocks placed in the sun. These rocks will soak up the sun's heat and give the adult butterflies a place to warm themselves.

## Hiding Places for Pupae and Other Useful Things

**Pupation sites.** The transformation from caterpillar to adult, the phase called pupation, is done within the protection of a chrysalis. Before building a chrysalis, however, a caterpillar wanders in search of a safe site. Depending upon the species, this haven could be a bush, tall grass, or piles of leaves or sticks. If you leave these features in your yard, you will encourage butterflies to stay around and drink the nectar you provide.

**Overwintering sites.** Depending upon the species, butterflies may overwinter (hibernate) as eggs, larvae, pupae, or even adults. You might find them on plants around the garden, under leaf litter, under loose bark, or in piles of logs and other debris. To help these hibernators, a little untidiness goes a long way. Two or three weeks before the severe cold of winter sets in, clean up only the leaves and garden debris that you must and pile up some logs or leaves around the edge of your yard.

**Do not use insecticides in your garden.** Finally, don't use pesticides in your garden. Alternative methods for controlling specific garden pests without using chemicals are available, but even these should be used with caution and keeping in mind the various life stages of butterflies.

For more pollinator conservation information, go to [www.xerces.org](http://www.xerces.org)