



Attracting Butterflies to the Garden

Quick Facts...

- Many kinds of butterflies can be found in Colorado. Encourage butterflies by planning a butterfly Garden.
- Butterflies seek out areas with food plants for the caterpillar stage. Adult butterflies also feed on fluids such as nectar from flowers.
- Butterfly visits increase when environmental needs are met.
- Gardening practices to attract and retain butterflies often differ from regular Gardening practices.

Dozens of butterfly species commonly occur along the Front Range and eastern Colorado and are a welcome Garden addition for many people. Butterflies often appear to be just passing through, occasionally stopping for a drink of nectar. You can prolong the stay of these colorful Insects and draw in others by providing the food and shelter they need.

Planning the Butterfly Garden

Make a yard more attractive to butterflies by providing the proper environment. Most important are food plants used by the immature stages (various caterpillars), food sources used by the adult butterflies, and physical environment.

Most butterflies prefer some shelter from the high winds common along the Front Range. At the same time, they like open, sunny areas. Windbreak plantings or other means of sheltering the butterfly Garden can help provide a suitable physical environment.

Certain kinds of butterflies (mostly males) often can be seen on moist sand or mud collecting around puddles of water where they feed. The function of these "mud-puddle clubs" is not fully understood, but it is thought that the water contains dissolved minerals needed by the Insects. Maintaining a damp, slightly salty area in the yard may attract groups of these butterflies.

Adult female butterflies spend time searching for food plants required by the immature caterpillar stage. Most butterflies have specific host plants on which they develop. For example, caterpillars of the monarch butterfly develop only on milkweed, while the black swallowtail feeds only on parsley, dill and closely related plants. When females find the proper host plant, they may lay eggs on it.

Providing the necessary food plants for the developing caterpillars also allows production of a "native" population that can be observed in all stages of development. Most species, however, fly away as adult butterflies.

Food for adult butterflies usually consists of sweet liquids, such as nectar from flowers, that provide energy. Some flowers contain more nectar, and are more attractive to butterflies. Often, specific types of flowers and flower colors also are more attractive. Some species feed on honeydew (produced by aphids), plant sap, rotting fruit and even bird dung.

When planning a Garden, create a large patch of a flower species to attract and retain butterflies. Consider flowers that bloom in sequence. This is particularly important during summer when flower visiting by butterflies is most frequent. Flowers and flowering shrubs that might be good choices for an eastern Colorado butterfly Garden are included in Table 1.

Table 1: Nectar-bearing plants commonly visited by butterflies

Asters (Aster spp.)
Bee balm (Monarda)
Butterfly bush (Buddleia davidii)
Butterfly plant (Asclepias tuberosa)
Bush cinquefolia (Potentilla fruticosa)
Cosmos (Cosmos spp.)
Gaillardia (Gaillardia spp.)
Lilac (Syringa vulgaris)
Marigold (Tagetes spp.)
Ornamental thistles
Rabbitbrush (Chrysothamnus nauseosus)
Sunflower (Helianthus spp.)
Sweet pea (Lathyrus odoratus)
Verbena (Verbena spp.)
Zinnias (Zinnia spp.)

Table 2: Food used by common Eastern Colorado Butterflies

Butterfly	Flight period	Caterpillar food	Common nectar plants, adult food
Black swallowtail (<i>Papilio polyxenes</i>)	April-September	Dill, parsley, fennel, carrot	Butterfly weed, alfalfa, thistle
Checkered skipper (<i>Pyrgus communis</i>)	April-October	Mallow, hollyhock	Verbena, dandelion, Canada thistle, aster
Checkered white (<i>Pontia protodice</i>)	April-November	Tumble mustard	Alfafa, mustards, bee balm
Clouded sulfur (<i>Colias philodice</i>)	April-November	Alfalfa, clover	Alfalfa, phlox, rabbitbrush, aster, marigold
Edwards fritillary (<i>Speyeria edwardsii</i>)	June-September	Nuttall's violet	Rabbitbrush, gaillardia, bee balm
European cabbage butterfly (<i>Pieris rapae</i>)	April-October	Broccoli, cabbage (mustard family)	Many
Gorgone checkerspot (<i>Charidryas gorgone</i>)	May-September	Sunflowers	White clover, dandelion, Canada thistle
Gray hairstreak (<i>Strymon melinus</i>)	May-October	Many	Many
Hackberry butterfly (<i>Asterocampa celtis</i>)	May-September	Hackberry	Rotting fruit, sap flows
Melissa blue (<i>Lycaeides melissa</i>)	April-October	Wild licorice, alfalfa, etc.	Bee balm, sweet clover
Monarch (<i>Danaus plexippus</i>)	June-October	Milkweed	Cosmos, Canada thistle, rabbitbrush, etc.
Mourning cloak (<i>Nymphalis antiopa</i>)	February-November	Willow, aspen, cottonwood, elm	Rabbitbrush, milkweed, sap
Orange sulfur (<i>Colias eurytheme</i>)	April-October	Alfalfa, vetch, pea	Alfalfa, marigold, zinnia
Painted Lady (<i>Vanessa cardui</i>)	April-October	Thistle, hollyhock, sunflower	Grape hyacinth, cosmos, zinnia, alfalfa, many flowers
Silver-spotted skipper (<i>Epargyreus clarus</i>)	May-July	Wild licorice, locust, etc.	Lilac, dogbane, zinnia, sweet pea, Canada thistle
Two-tailed swallowtail (<i>Papilio multicaudatus</i>)	April-August	Green ash, chokecherry	Geranium, thistle, milkweed
Variiegated fritillary (<i>Euptoieta claudia</i>)	April-October	Various, including pansy	Rabbitbrush, Canada thistle
Weidemeyer's admiral (<i>Limentitis weidemeyerii</i>)	June-September	Willow, aspen, cottonwood	Sap flows, snowberry, dung
Western tiger swallowtail (<i>Papilio rutulus</i>)	May-July	Willow, cottonwood, chokecherry	Zinnia, lilac, butterflybush, thistle, milkweed
Wood nymph (<i>Cercyonis pegala</i>)	June-August	Grasses	Rabbitbrush, clematis, Canada thistle