



HOME & GARDEN

Attracting butterflies to the garden no. 5.504

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Quick Facts...

Many kinds of butterflies can be found in eastern Colorado and butterfly visiting can be encouraged 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 visiting will increase when environmental needs are met.

Gardening practices used to attract and retain butterflies often differ from regular gardening practices.

Dozens of butterfly species commonly occur along the Front Range and eastern Colorado. The presence of butterflies in the yard is a welcome addition for many people. Butterflies often appear to be just passing through, occasionally stopping for a drink of nectar. However, some gardeners may wish to prolong the stay of these colorful insects and to draw in others by providing food and shelter required by butterflies.

Planning the Butterfly Garden

An area can be made more attractive to butterflies if it can provide the proper environment sought by the insects. 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 high winds common along the Front Range and at the same time, open sunny areas. Windbreak types of 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 only develop 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, will fly away as adult butterflies.

Food for adult butterflies usually consists of sweet liquids that provide needed energy sources, such as nectar from flowers. Some flowers contain more nectar thereby increasing their attractiveness to butterflies. Often, specific types of flowers and flower colors are more attractive to butterflies. Honeydew (produced by aphids), plant sap, rotting fruit, and even bird dung are fed upon by some species.

When planning a planting it is most effective to 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.

Common butterflies in eastern Colorado and the foods used by these insects are included in Table 2. By planning the yard or garden to include these food sources, a steady flow of butterfly visitors is encouraged.

Table 1: Ten plants to attract butterflies.

Asters
Butterfly bush (<i>Buddleia davidi</i>)
Butterfly plant (<i>Asclepias tuberosa</i>)
Bush cinquefolia (<i>Potentilla fruticosa</i>)
Cosmos (<i>Cosmos</i> spp.)
Lilac (<i>Syringa vulgaris</i>)
Marigold (<i>Tagetes</i> spp.)
Rabbitbrush (<i>Chrysothamnus nauseosus</i>)
Verbena (<i>Verbena</i> spp.)
Zinnias

Common Conflicts

Many of the most attractive nectar plants are commonly considered as “weeds” in other settings. Good examples of these are various thistles and dandelion, all highly attractive to several common butterflies. The well-manicured and tended garden will discourage some butterfly species that develop on wild types of plants. (Note: Canada thistle is considered a noxious weed. Areas of the state that have formed weed districts prohibit by law the culture of Canada thistle.)

A few of the butterflies also develop upon certain garden crops and may be pests if the vegetable is considered more desirable than the insects. The European cabbage butterfly (broccoli, cabbage, other mustards) and the black swallowtail (parsley, dill) are common garden inhabitants in Colorado.

Use insecticides sparingly because most are not compatible with the goal of attracting and increasing the number of butterflies in a yard. Most garden insecticides can kill the caterpillar stages of the insects and adult butterflies can also be killed by resting on insecticide-treated surfaces.

References

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- R. M. Pyle, Alfred A. Knopf, *Audubon Field Guide to North American Butterflies*, New York, New York 1981.
- C. D. Ferris and F. M. Brown, *Butterflies of the Rocky Mountain States*, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, Oklahoma. 1980.

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Some Common Colorado Butterflies



Figure 1: Weidemeyer's Admiral.



Figure 2: Mourning Cloak.

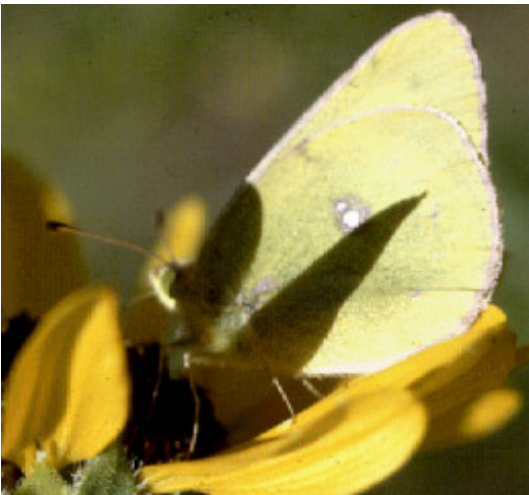


Figure 3: Orange sulphur.



Figure 4: Two-tailed swallowtail.

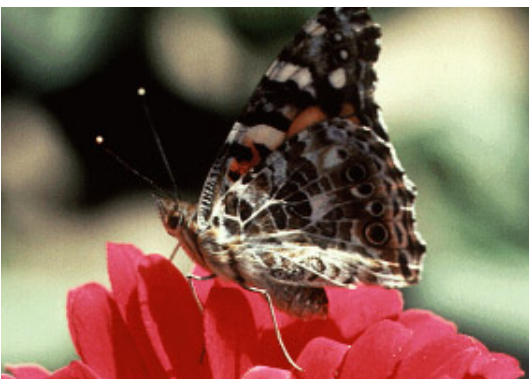


Figure 5: Painted lady.



Figure 6: Monarch.

Table 2: Food used by common eastern Colorado butterflies and skippers.

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