

## **Butterfly Gardening**

by Jane Morse, University of Florida/IFAS Extension Agent, Manatee County

If you want to do something good for you and Florida - start a butterfly garden. We have nearly 200 species of butterflies, some of which can be found nowhere else in the world.

Butterflies help pollinate a wide range of flowering plants. They are a food source for many other critters such as nesting birds, lizards, spiders and other insects. Butterflies also serve as “umbrella” species -- when the habitats of butterflies are protected, other creatures and plants that live there are also protected. Butterflies are an important indicator species. They are among the first organisms to die when there are negative environmental changes and pollutants. Butterflies are our “canaries in the coal mines” and can alert us to environmental problems.

Butterflies have four different life stages: egg, larva (caterpillar), chrysalis, and adult. The adult lays her eggs on a larval food plant (these are very specific to the type of butterfly). Caterpillars emerge within a few days and start their eating frenzy. They do nothing but eat and grow (kind of like a teenage boy). When their skin is stretched as far as possible, they molt or shed their skin like a snake. After enough molts they look for a safe, sheltered spot. They then spin a stiff butterfly chrysalis (pupa) to replace their larva skin. It is during this stage that the once worm-like caterpillar transforms itself into a beautiful butterfly. The cycle is ready to begin once more.

Butterflies, like all wildlife, must have four basic needs met. These needs are food, water, shelter and space, and together these provide a habitat. Butterflies live in a wide variety of habitats, such as wetlands, swamps, forest edges, open areas, fields, gardens, sandhills, scrub and flatwoods. If you live within a quarter-mile of a certain habitat, try enticing the butterfly species that live in that type of habitat to come to your yard, but keep your yard free of pesticides. They kill butterflies.

The best butterfly garden provides food for both the adult butterflies and their caterpillars. While butterflies will drink nectar from a wide variety of flowers, they tend to stay close to areas that contain the plants that are needed by their caterpillar life stage.

Butterflies prefer brightly colored simple flowers that are not too deep and that are wide enough for good landing platforms. Favorite flowers include phlox, zinnias, asters, marigolds, daisies, coneflowers, black-eyed Susan, verbena, salvia, milkweeds, and thistles. Choose brightly colored flowers and provide a wide assortment of flower types and flower sizes. Flowers with the most scent generally provide the most nectar. Try to provide flowering plants for as many months as possible. Some butterflies are attracted to aphids, manure, rotting fruit, mud or tree sap, rather than flowers.

Caterpillar food plants are specific to the butterfly species. Some plants, like passion vine, are hosts to many butterfly larvae, but many larvae require their own specific food plant. American swallowtail larvae prefer parsley and wild carrot. Monarch larvae prefer Indian hemp and milkweed. Red admiral larvae prefer nettles, pellitory and false

nettle.

For specific information about butterfly gardening and the butterflies in our area, call the University of Florida/IFAS Manatee County Extension Service (941-722-4524) and ask to speak to a Master Gardener. Ask for publication number 289. It's free.

~~~~~

Jane Morse  
Environmental Extension Agent,  
Manatee County

1303 17th Street West  
Palmetto, FL 34221  
Phone: 941-722-4524  
Fax: 941-721-6608