

From Second Nature, July 2009

## **Blooms are for Butterflies**

Few things say summer the same as a butterfly basking in the morning sun, fluttering brightly over a woodland stream or probing wildflowers for nectar. Butterflies offer a colorful and exciting way to share some of the intricacies of nature with children. They are easy to watch, exhibit interesting behaviors and are active during warm and sunny days. One of the easiest ways to learn more about butterflies with your kids is to welcome them right to your yard with a butterfly garden.

Blooming gardens provide butterflies with the nectar they eat to survive and continue their life cycle. Fortunately, butterflies are drawn to many of the same colorful flowers as people, so you and your children can look forward to enjoying your garden at the same time as viewing butterflies and contributing to their conservation. Butterfly gardens can be as small as a window box or as big as your whole yard, as long as they are in a sunny, protected location.

When planning and planting your butterfly garden with your kids, think diversity. Butterflies like lots of different flowering plants, something that children relate to immediately, so a wider variety in your garden is likely to attract more of them. Try to include flowers that bloom at different times, so that butterflies find nectar there all through the summer. For example, primrose blooms in the spring, dogbane in early summer, butterfly weed in midsummer, and phlox and asters in late summer and fall.

Butterflies are especially attracted to red, orange, yellow and purple flowers. Try to clump the flowers in your garden by species and color, as butterflies will more likely find large patches of color than if the colors are mixed together. Surprisingly, many big, showy flowers, like irises and lilies are bred for their size and are often poor nectar sources. Native plants like New England aster, black-eyed susan, blazing star, milkweed and joe-pye weed are sometimes preferred by butterflies, and usually require less maintenance; if you plant these you can feel good about helping to conserve native plants along with the butterflies you enjoy.

If you want to see even more of your butterfly visitors with your kids, you can include plants that caterpillars, or butterfly larvae, rely on for food. These are more specific to each butterfly species. For example, black swallowtail adults enjoy the nectar of milkweed, thistle and many other plants, but lay their eggs only on carrot and related plants, like parsnip, dill, and parsley. Red admiral butterflies feed on nectar as well as tree sap and even animal droppings, but rely on nettles and false nettles for their larvae to feed on. Familiar monarch butterflies lay their eggs only on milkweed plants, so their caterpillars can acquire immunity from predation by ingesting the toxins in these plants.

Including caterpillar host plants in your yard increases the chance that you and your children will see courtship behavior and witness the life cycle of your butterfly visitors. But whatever you do, don't use insecticides anywhere near your butterfly garden. You may have to put up with a few chopped leaves, but some of this chomping may be by caterpillars that will turn into butterflies you enjoy later.