

Friday's Feature

By

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Invite butterflies to your garden

A butterfly garden is an easy way to see more butterflies and to contribute toward their conservation. Conservation efforts are important since many natural butterfly habitats have been lost to urbanization and other development.

To begin, select a site for your butterfly garden that will receive sun for most of the day. Although full sun is desirable for the garden, butterflies will benefit from having a windbreak nearby for those days with gusty winds. The same windbreak can provide shade on those very hot days in north Florida. If the windbreak includes shrubs, the butterflies may also use the plants as a roosting area at night.

Once a sunny location is selected and before planting, take a soil sample. Contact your local Cooperative Extension Office for soil testing information. Apply lime and fertilizer according to the recommendations from the soil test. Keep in mind that once established it will be difficult to improve the soil in the butterfly garden, particularly if perennial plants are involved.

When choosing a site for your butterfly garden remember to place it close to a water supply so that the plants in the garden can be watered if necessary.

Be sure to plant both host plants and nectar plants. Host plants are those where the adult butterfly lays her eggs and the caterpillar will feed. Several good host plants include milkweed for the monarch butterfly, passionvine for the gulf fritillary, cassia for the cloudless sulphur, wild lime for the giant swallowtail and pawpaw for the zebra swallowtail.



Passionvine is a host plant for the gulf fritillary caterpillar

Nectar plants are also needed in the butterfly garden. These plants provide the food for the adult butterflies. Several good nectar plants include zinnas, goldenrod, butterfly bush, plumbago, verbena, firebush, pentas and porterweed.

Remember to add an artificial puddle or two. Several species of butterflies are attracted to free-standing puddles. They not only benefit from a drink but also utilize salts and breakdown products of decaying

vegetation which is present in most puddles.

To keep your puddles from becoming a source of mosquitoes, bury a shallow potted plant saucer to its rim in an area receiving full sun in the butterfly garden. Fill the saucer with coarse pine bark or stones and fill to overflowing with water. The butterflies are able to drink from the cracks between the pine bark pieces or the stones while the mosquito larvae have a difficult time becoming established. Occasionally adding a small piece of over-ripe fruit, some stale beer, or a tablespoonful of composted cow manure or leaf compost to the puddle will provide the salts and amino acids that the butterflies need.

To keep the plants in your butterfly garden productive, scatter a slow release fertilizer two to three times during the summer. Do not over fertilize. Excessive nitrogen may reduce flowering.

Avoid the use of broad-spectrum pesticides. Alternatives are oils, soaps and microbial insecticides. But keep in mind that oils and insecticidal soaps can kill caterpillars if sprayed directly on them. A good side effect of decreased pesticide use is the increase of natural enemies.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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