



by Karen Stephens

Butterfly Garden Activities Stir Children's Sense of Wonder

Butterflies. They gracefully trace blue skies with iridescent wings. Etched with designs that rival stained-glass art, they're "symbols of the soul." There's no denying it, butterflies are the prettiest insects around!

A popular trend in gardening today is creating gardens designed specifically to attract butterflies. Most towns have one or more; they're especially popular on school yards. If you find one in your area, fun and beauty await your family.

A butterfly garden is colorful and fragrant. It intrigues children's curious minds and softens their hearts toward nature. With you as guide through a butterfly garden, they'll learn to care for and protect earth's creatures. And butterflies need it. By destroying habitat and using pesticides, humans put a stop to the butterfly's dance.

A butterfly garden doesn't happen by chance, it takes purposeful planning. A butterfly garden needs full sun; the butterflies need it for warmth and food. Colorful flowers with varying blooming time provide butterflies food from spring through fall frost.

You can't get butterflies without caterpillars, so a butterfly garden includes host plants. Butterflies lay eggs on them; when caterpillars hatch they instinctively gorge on the host plant. (Some butterflies are finicky. The monarch only lays eggs on milkweed plants. Why? Milkweed is all her caterpillars will eat. And you thought YOU had a picky eater!)

Birdbaths and rocks placed in gardens can collect rain to become butterfly watering holes. Bushy plants of different heights allow butterflies and caterpillars to hide from predators, like birds and praying mantis. It's handy shelter in harsh weather, too!

Those are butterfly garden basics. But there's much more to discover. To lure your family to the winged sanctuary of a butterfly garden, following is a seek and find challenge.

For the fun of it, see how many answers the kids can find. Some will be factual, some just brain teasers. Some questions are for young kids, others for older ones. It might take you several trips to a garden to find everything, but that doesn't matter. This isn't a race, it's not a test; it's a game, so grab an hour here and there to enjoy garden delights! I wish I could be there when the kids jump up and squeal, "Hey, I found it! I found it!" But that's not what's important. What's important is that YOU'LL be there.

Items to Seek and Find

- Birds like to eat butterflies and caterpillars. Find good places for butterflies to hide!
- Butterflies get thirsty. Where can they find water?
- Find a butterfly eating. What flower is it? What plant does a caterpillar like?
- Butterflies come in rainbow colors. Name all the colors you see.
- Many creatures live in the garden. What insects live with the butterflies? (Spiders are arachnids, so you can't count them!) What birds, mammals, or reptiles live in the garden?

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- Find heavenly blue-flowered vines said to be glories of morning. What are they?
- Find a small berry tree that has the same name as Mary Poppin's profession.
- Walk a path that curves. Where does it take you?
- Butterflies like flowers of all sizes. Find a tall one, short one, and a teeny-tiny one.
- Find a vine whose name won't tell butterflies if it's sweet or bitter! What is it?
- Find a berry bush that sounds like it needs the Heimlich maneuver! What is it?
- Spy a clematis-covered arbor; walk backwards through it.
- Find roses that are almost, but not quite wild. What's their name and color?
- Find a vine that would blow like a bugle if it could. What is it?
- Find a flower named after Susan with very dark eyes. What is it?
- Watch a butterfly resting on a rock with wings outstretched. What is it doing?
- Search out a garden bench. Lay back and watch a butterfly pass by. Describe its flight.
- See if there is an arbor. What's growing on it?
- These are common butterflies. How many can you spy?: Monarch, tiger swallowtail, black swallowtail, spicebush swallowtail, cabbage white, red-spotted purple, painted lady, red admiral, comma, question mark, yellow sulphurs, blues, mourning cloak, great spangled fritillary, viceroy.
- Lightly rub the leaves of the plant that sounds as soft as a baby sheep's ear. What is it?
- Butterflies love the nectar of these flowers. Circle all you can find: Bee balm, black-eyed Susan, butterfly bush, butterfly weed, cardinal flower, coreopsis, cosmos, daylily, goldenrod, hollyhock, honeysuckle, lantana, lavender, marigold, milkweed, nicotiana, petunia, phlox, purple coneflower, salvia, sunflower, thistle, trumpet vine, yarrow, and zinnia.

Butterfly Facts for Kids

Butterflies are insects that first decorated our planet 120 million years ago, before birds or humans. Like bees, they are great pollinators. Most live only 3-14 days, but a new generation is born every month! (There are miraculous exceptions. In spring, painted ladies live long enough to migrate here from African deserts, plus lay their eggs. And hormones trigger summer's last batch of monarchs to migrate 3,000 miles to Mexico!)

Butterfly life cycle is egg, caterpillar (larvae stage), chrysalis (cocoon with pupa inside), and adult butterfly. Flutterbys (as some toddlers call them) have three main body parts (head, thorax, abdomen), two forewings, two hind wings, and six jointed legs.

There are 700 species of butterfly in the US (15,000 worldwide.) Butterflies are daytime fliers. They range from 1 inch to 12 inches wide. They eat liquid food; flower nectar is first choice. They use a hollow proboscis to eat; it's like a straw. They probe flowers, and the inside of fruit, and sip away! The proboscis is coiled up when not in use.

Butterfly wings are covered with powdery scales, overlapping like roof shingles. Wing colors and patterns attract mates, provide camouflage, and warn or outwit predators. Monarchs' orange means, "Don't eat me, I'm toxic!" A buckeye butterfly's large spots look like owl eyes and scare smaller birds away.

Wing scales create air pockets to help butterflies stay aloft. Butterflies are cold-blooded; their body temperature is the same as the surrounding air. They can't fly until their temperature is 80 degrees! To speed warm-up, they bask in the sun with wings outstretched. Similar to solar collector panels, the wings take in heat to allow flight.

Humans have one eye lens, butterflies have thousands! They can see in every direction. They also can see ultraviolet light, which means flower colors appear much more vivid to them than to us. (Can you imagine?!)

Butterflies use antennae to smell, taste, feel, and navigate. And unlike humans who just have smelly feet, butterflies smell and taste WITH their feet. When feeding, their feet's tiny claws or spurs grip flowers. These claws also help butterflies cling underneath plant leaves. (Which answers the age-old question of where do butterflies go when it rains!)

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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