Butterfly Gardening

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It’s a great time to start a butterfly garden for your own enjoyment, for the benefit of butterflies, and for the preservation of Florida wildlife communities. Of all the states, Florida is one of the best for attracting a wide variety of butterflies to your flower garden. There are at least 180 species found in Florida and 40 of those are found primarily within Florida’s borders.

Gardening to attract butterflies can be a very rewarding hobby for several reasons. Plants that attract the adult butterfly have interesting shapes and lovely colors. The dreamlike flight of a butterfly among the flowers adds another dimension of movement and interest to a flowerbed. By creating a habitat for butterflies, a natural environment has also been maintained for other organisms that share the same space.

Nectar plants are needed to attract and feed the adult butterflies. The female adult may enjoy a variety of nectar sources, but she is very picky about where she lays her eggs. Although you can attract adult butterflies without the larval plants, the adults will remain in an area if you also have plants for the eggs and larvae (caterpillars). A larval host plant is usually a native plant that is eaten only by specific species.

In nature, plants and insects have some very interesting relationships that help them survive together. A butterfly needs to find the flower for nectar and the plant needs to be pollinated by the activity of that butterfly. It is a mutual relationship because they both help each other. The flower may have evolved with an attracting color, shape or size that signals their partner insect where food can be found. The butterfly may have developed just the right length to its straw-like proboscis in order to sip the nectar from a particular trumpet flower. Or did the flower develop to match the size of the proboscis?

There are so many of these special relationships between different organisms going on right in your own backyard. They have developed as a means of survival. It isn’t any wonder that any human activity can interfere with the complexity of this fine web of relationships. By the time a species is determined endangered, how many other organisms have also been affected in that web of relationships?

When your garden has a diverse population of visiting butterflies, you have succeeded in providing a habitat for other wildlife. Butterflies are called an “umbrella” species. By caring for these gentle insects, you are also caring for all the other organisms interacting in that habitat. So the butterflies are the “umbrella” of life support for everything else seen and unseen in the garden.

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