

Growing Herbs for Butterflies

Bring butterflies to your garden space with
Herbs

Cindy Meredith

HERBS & BUTTERFLIES

In my travels around South Central Texas giving programs and selling herb plants, I've met people who love to grow herbs for many reasons: cooking, health, crafting, history and landscaping. It's this last category, landscaping, with a focus on growing to attract butterflies that this little publication covers.

Butterflies are charming creatures- light, airy, colorful and graceful. They are also somewhat at risk due to habitat destruction in many places, including the US, and the use and misuse of pesticides. So, what's a gardener to do to help fortify and expand the butterfly population?

Grow Herbs, of course!!

The plants that we know as herbs are wonderful butterfly attractors and many are host plants where the butterfly lays its eggs to hatch into larva for the next generation. There are so many herbs that attract butterflies which can be grown among your vegetables and in the flower bed as well as in a dedicated herb bed.

Rue- *Ruta graveolens*

The herb Rue, *Ruta graveolens*, is a perfect example. It's grayish leaves contrast nicely with the greens of other plants and the flowers attract butterflies and other pollinators.

Growing Rue in the deep South can be problematical, as it doesn't respond well to our heat and humidity. But, I find in part shade with excellent drainage it does just fine. I had good results with it during one summer's extreme heat and drought. Perhaps because the plant likes dry conditions and the air was drier, too, my Rue did better than in the past.



Pineapple Sage- *Salvia elegans*



Another herb to attract butterflies is Pineapple Sage, *Salvia elegans*- a bushy, aromatic salvia that produces spikes of bright red flowers. I find that it grows best in dappled light or morning sun, afternoon shade, and it does like its share of water. To me it is not considered a drought tolerant plant. Butterflies and hummingbirds are much attracted to the brilliant red blossoms.

Salvia elegans grows into a nice little bush with signature *Salvia* flowers.

Basil for Butterflies?

Many people don't realize that Basil flowers are excellent butterfly attractors. African Blue Basil which is grown more as a landscape plant than for culinary use attracts lots of tiny Skipper butterflies in the fall in our area. I've also seen larger butterflies enjoying the nectar from the tiny flowers. All basil flowers will attract butterflies, not just the African Blue.



Magical Michael Basil grown for its lovely flowers as well as flavorful leaves.

African Blue Basil



Yarrow-*Achillea millefolium*

A discussion of herbs for butterflies wouldn't be complete without the addition of Yarrow, *Achillea millifolia*. Yarrow has ferny looking foliage with tall, flat flower heads made up of many tiny flowers. The flat flower heads make a convenient landing place for butterflies to rest, bask in the sun and sip nectar from the tiny flowers.

Yarrow at The Herb Cottage in late fall. No flowers. Yarrow flowers in the Spring.



White Yarrow Flowers

Butterfly Weed- *Asclepius tuberosa*



The milkweed family of plants plays an important part in the lives of the Monarch Butterfly. The plant we know as Butterfly Weed, *Asclepius tuberosa* or Pleurisy Root, gives the Monarchs a toxin which tastes foul to predators, thus they leave the Monarchs alone. Butterfly Weed grows well in most gardens, but it doesn't transplant too well due to its long taproot. It needs well-draining soil and lots of

sun- even here in Texas, so long as it's planted in the ground. A container plant will always need some afternoon shade to keep the roots cool. All the plants in the milkweed family are host plants for the Monarch Butterfly and will also attract others such as the Tiger Swallowtail and Queen Butterfly.

Passion Flower Vine- *Passiflora spp.*

If you like to grow vines, there is one herbal vine that is a must to attract butterflies. It is fairly common in my part of Texas- Passion flower Vine, *Passiflora spp.* There are many species of *Passiflora* and all of them attract butterflies. The variety that does the best here and is the most hardy is the native one, *Passiflora incarnata*. It attracts flocks of the Gulf Fritillary Butterfly, which lays its eggs on the plant so the larva have food upon hatching out. So, your vine will often look a little bit chewed up, but I have not found that the leaf damage bothers the flowering too much.



I have mentioned only a few of the wonderful, fragrant and useful herbs that attract butterflies.

Rosemary, Echinacea, Lavender, Thyme, Savory, Oregano, Catmint, Catnip, Parsley, Dill, Fennel, all the *Salvias*-- these herbs all attract butterflies at some stage in their life cycle.

One of the best things you can do to keep the colorful and lovely butterflies in your garden is to not only plant some of the plants I've mentioned, but to also garden using organic practices. Pesticides kill not only the "bad bugs", but also the butterflies and other beneficial insects.