



THE LANDSCAPE CENTER

Butterfly and hummingbird gardening using annuals

Here in Colorado we are lucky. Not only do we have many species of butterflies that frequent our area, but we also have several types of hummingbirds that visit us. To set up a butterfly and hummingbird garden, keep a few simple thoughts in mind.

Butterflies – First, realize that each life stage of the butterfly has specific needs. The food sources for immature stages (various caterpillars) and adult butterflies can often be very different. Food supply is critical and so is the physical environment they each need.

It is helpful to provide shelter from wind for butterflies, using windbreaks or a sheltered area. It is also important to know that most butterflies have specific host plants on which they develop. Monarch butterfly caterpillars will only develop on milkweed. Black swallowtails feed only on parsley, dill and related plants.

The food supply for adult butterflies usually consists of nectar, or sweet liquids, produced by flowers. Some types of flowers produce more nectar than others and even flower color can attract or deter butterflies.

Some of the more common butterflies in Colorado and their favorite annual flowering plants on which adults feed include:

- Two-tailed swallowtail (geranium)
- Western tiger swallowtail (zinnia)
- Monarch (cosmos)
- Painted lady (cosmos, zinnia, many other flowers)
- Clouded sulfur (phlox, marigold)
- Orange sulfur (marigold, zinnia)
- Silver-spotted skipper (zinnia, sweet pea)
- Checkered skipper (verbena, aster)

Keep in mind that the caterpillars (immature stages) of butterflies can be destructive to desirable plants. For example, as mentioned earlier, black swallowtail caterpillars will munch on dill, parsley, fennel, and carrot. So be careful where you plant these if you want them for your dining room table instead of for caterpillar food. The same applies to the European cabbage butterfly which likes broccoli, cabbage, and other members of the mustard family.

Hummingbirds – There are several types of hummingbirds that live in Colorado. The most common is the broad-tailed hummingbird. Others that we may see from time to time include rufous, calliope, and black-chinned hummingbirds. During the summer we see hummingbirds most frequently in the foothills and the mountains, because they nest in these areas.

It is a little harder to attract hummingbirds to our gardens than it is to attract butterflies. First of all, the garden must be visible to them from 30 to 50 feet overhead. The colors must be vivid in order to catch their eyes on their migratory trips from mid-April to mid-May and again from mid-July through September.

There is a long list of flowers that are attractive to hummingbirds. Some annuals that you might have success with include geraniums, verbena, dianthus, vinca, morning glories, salvia, and smaller-flowered petunias.

Here are some other tips that may help you in luring butterflies and hummingbirds to your garden. Plant several separate gardens to minimize competition between butterflies and hummingbirds. Plant masses of color closely together to create islands of bright color. Annuals work particularly well for this. Plant some of the annuals that attract both butterflies and hummingbirds, such as geranium and verbena. Plan your garden so that some flowers are blooming all summer. Timing is everything. And, lastly, minimize the use of harsh pesticides if at all possible. Not only will they harm many butterflies and hummingbirds, but they may also kill spiders and insects that are also eaten by hummingbirds.

-- Karen L. Panter, CSU Extension Agent, Adams County