

# Build a Butterfly Habitat

<https://www.habitatbuilders.org/butterfly-habitat>

Basic Requirements for ALL Wildlife Habitats:

- ALL animals need water year around.
- Pesticides and herbicides do not discriminate, even "organic" versions.
- Lights on at night disturb normal plant and animal cycles (true for humans too) so turn the lights off.

## Butterfly Habitat Building 101

- Level 1 (simplest version) Provide native nectar plants in your landscape.
- Level 2 Add host plants to your landscape.
- Level 3 Leave the leaves.
- Level 4 Add shrubs and trees that offer protection from weather and predators.
- Level 5 Decrease turf grass/lawn, replace with native nectar and host plants.

### LEVEL 1 - Provide Nectar Plants = Butterfly FOOD

Butterflies eat nectar and most butterflies aren't too picky about which plants they like best. The plant just needs to be a good nectar source. Some butterfly fan favorites that are easy to grow are Bee Balm, Mountain Mint, Coreopsis, Black-eyed Susan, Joe Pye Weed, Milkweed, Blue Mist Flower, Goldenrod and Asters. All these plants like sunny locations. Some can tolerate wetter or drier conditions.

For the most successful plantings, find a location in your landscape to plant. Notice the conditions: sun, soil texture, soil moisture, drainage and consider the space available. Take this info to the [NC Plant Toolbox](https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/), (<https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/>) click "Find a Plant" and enter your criteria in the left side column. Note Union County is in the Piedmont, Zone 8a. Make sure to click Native Plants under Plant Type and Butterflies under Landscape/Attracts. Try this [search](https://bit.ly/3OKkMT1), (<https://bit.ly/3OKkMT1>) for 90 herbaceous perennials that work well in our area and support butterflies. Narrow this list with your own particular criteria.

### LEVEL 2 - Provide Host Plants = Butterfly Nursery and Caterpillar Food

Butterflies eat nectar but butterfly babies, usually called caterpillars, eat plants. The plants that particular butterfly caterpillars like are called their host plants. And this is where it gets interesting. Some caterpillars like a lot of different plants and others are very, very picky about which plants they will eat. The Eastern Swallowtail (*Papilio glaucus*) is very common in our area and their caterpillars are not very picky. The National Wildlife Federation lists 13 host plants for swallowtails [here](https://nativeplantfinder.nwf.org/Wildlife/5705), (<https://nativeplantfinder.nwf.org/Wildlife/5705>). All 13 are trees! So if you want to see the caterpillars and you like herbs, plant enough parsley, dill and fennel to share. You will definitely see the caterpillars and you may see the chrysalises too.

On the other end of the spectrum are picky caterpillars. Arguably the most famous example in our area is the Monarch (*Danaus plexippus*). Monarch caterpillars will ONLY eat milkweed, Monarch butterflies lay their eggs on milkweed (*Asclepias spp.*). There are several varieties that grow in our area, have a look [here](https://bit.ly/4g3uk7F), (<https://bit.ly/4g3uk7F>). *Asclepias tuberosa* is probably the best behaved and is a good size for most yards. Don't plant non-native varieties like *Asclepias curassavica*, also called <https://www.habitatbuilders.org/butterfly-habitat>

Tropical Milkweed. It will not support our Monarchs as well because it blooms out of sync with their migration patterns.

### **LEVEL 3 - Leave the Leaves**

One of the simplest habitat friendly actions you can take is to take no action! Leave the leaves. Leaves are fantastic mulch for the trees that made them and for other plants as well. Equally important, leaves offer “housing” for lots of wildlife. Mourning Cloaks, Red-banded Hairstreaks, Io Moths, and Luna Moths overwinter in fallen leaves. There is a lot more info in this excellent [NWF blog post](https://blog.nwf.org/2024/09/how-fallen-leaves-support-moths-and-butterflies/), (<https://blog.nwf.org/2024/09/how-fallen-leaves-support-moths-and-butterflies/>).

If you must move the leaves rake them instead of blowing them and don't mow them (i.e. chop them). Raking causes the least amount of damage to the overwintering wildlife.

### **LEVEL 4 - Add Shrubs and Trees that Offer Protection from Weather and Predators**

Larger plants can offer more protection for wildlife and in some cases also be a nectar source or a host plant. For example, the Tulip Poplar (*Liriodendron tulipifera*) is a great example of a large, relatively fast growing native tree that provides all these eco-services for swallowtail butterflies. Other examples of trees that attract and support butterflies in our area can be found [here](https://bit.ly/3ZHJRUUV), (<https://bit.ly/3ZHJRUUV>). Examples of shrubs that attract butterflies in our area can be found [here](https://bit.ly/41mgNUb), (<https://bit.ly/41mgNUb>).

### **LEVEL 5 - Decrease Turf Grass/lawn, Replace with Native Nectar and Host Plants**

Even better than all the items discussed on this page is to implement all of them AND reduce your lawn at the same time. Turf grass is the largest mono-culture in this country and provides ZERO benefits to native wildlife. Depending on the amount of water, fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides used the lawn may be pretty toxic to wildlife (and you). Turf grass provides no eco-services, costs a lot of money and time to maintain, and with its shallow root system isn't even great at erosion control. So from a butterfly habitat building perspective, less lawn is best. Especially when it's replaced with leaf mulch and butterfly loving plants.

### **Non-Native Plant Exceptions**

Most conservation organizations suggest native plants, solely. But especially for butterflies there are some great non-native plants that are worth a shout out. [Lantana camara](https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/lantana-camara/), (<https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/lantana-camara/>) and [Zinnia](https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/zinnia/), (<https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/zinnia/>) are two great plants that provide nectar for a variety of butterflies throughout the summer months. Both are super easy to grow. Lantana is a shrub that comes in various colors, sizes and life-spans (annual or perennial) so do your research. Zinnias are annuals that can self-seed and also come in a variety of colors and heights. Both plants love the sun. Parsley, dill, and fennel are very popular host plants for swallowtail butterflies so plant a little extra for yourself.