Some Native Plants for Butterfly Gardens

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A lot of people enjoy up-close encounters with butterflies and birds, and many have learned that landscaping with certain native plants is a good way to attract those critters to their own yards. It stands to reason that native birds and butterflies are naturally more attracted to certain native plants than to most exotic plants, because over thousands of years our local insects and birds have evolved to depend on indigenous plants for food and shelter. In a way, I suppose, plants can be thought of as an integral part of the life cycles of butterflies and birds.

Butterfly gardens seem to be gaining popularity. The most complete butterfly gardens are designed to provide not only nectar for the adult butterflies, but also food for the butterfly larvae (caterpillars).

Botanical consultant Patty Leslie Pasztor recommends an array of native and near-native trees, shrubs, flowers, and vines to attract butterflies to a yard. Her list is long. For this column we can mention only some of the plants used in butterfly gardens.

The one butterfly everyone seems to recognize, at least by name, is the monarch. Female monarchs traveling through this area on the return from wintering in Mexico are laying eggs on our native antelope-horns milkweed (Asclepias asperula). These females will soon die, but the journey north will be continued by new butterflies metamorphosed from the larvae now hatching. It will require a few generations to complete the trip. Unfortunately, the number of monarchs returning from Mexico is at an all-time low.

The queen, cousin of the monarch and a common local resident, is seen nectaring on various flowers in this area throughout the warm months. The queen also lays eggs only on the milkweed.

Antelope-horn milkweed is not easy to find in nurseries. However, the long-blooming orange milkweed or butterfly weed (Asclepias tuberosa) and Mexican butterfly weed (A. currasavica) are available. Several kinds of large butterflies love to nectar on these flowers, and they are magnets to the monarchs that pass through here during their migrations.

Local native perennials that never fail to attract flocks of butterflies during the summer and fall are the three species of Eupatorium. Probably the best known of these is blue mist-flower (E. coelestinum). This flower and its cultivars and cousins are available in most nurseries, and they bloom well in Hill Country gardens.

My favorite Eupatorium is E. havanensis, thoroughwort. Even when not blooming, it makes an attractive shrub with cascading branches of small shiny leaves. In the fall this plant is covered with clusters of small white flowers. The fragrance seems to attract every butterfly and bee within miles. The other species of this genus native to this area is the boneset (E. serotinum), which also has small white flowers that draw many butterflies. This one may appear a little weedy for some gardens, but it looks fine in my less-formal yard.

Other shrubs which provide nectar for butterflies are agarita (Berberis trifoliolata), cenizo (Leucophyllum frutescens), flame acanthus (Arisacanthus quadrifidis), kidneywood (Eysenhardtia texana), pink mimosa (Mimosa borealis), and lantana (Lantana sp.). There are many more on Pasztor's list, but I can attest that those just mentioned are particularly drought tolerant. I rarely water these plants in my yard.

Among the native vines one can cultivate for attracting butterflies are coral honeysuckle (Lonicera sempervirens), white honeysuckle (L. albiflora), crossvine (Bignonia capreolata), and passion flower (Passiflora sp.).

There are many native flowers that butterflies light on for nectar, but the Central Texas and northeastern Mexico salvias seem to be among their favorites. Many salvias are available for purchase, and most of them are easy to grow.

Most of the native plants mentioned above will be found at Cibolo Nature Center's annual Mostly-Native Plant Sale. This event is on Saturday, April 16 at the Kendall County Fair Grounds. See you there.