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Celebrating natives  
plant and natural  
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## Meaningful Gardening: Tricks of the Trade to Bring Life to Your Garden

It's fall, the perfect time for planting. As you think about creating a new garden, consider ways in which you can garden more meaningfully. Many landscapes are full of plants that have little or no value to wildlife. These gardens are full of flowers and shrubs that are attractive to the human eye, but provide little more than just a pretty picture. The gardens are lifeless. For those of us who garden with natives, we know the garden can be much more. It can be a habitat, a life-sustaining force in our backyards.

Gardening to attract butterflies and moths (*lepidoptera*) to your yard can be very fulfilling. When creating a butterfly garden, there are a few things you should know to help you design your garden. First, most butterfly plants prefer full sun. Furthermore, you will find your butterflies are most active in your garden



Candy's curb-side pollinator garden. Photo Credit: Candy Sarikonda

on warm, sunny days. So choose a full sun location for your garden if possible. Second, install butterfly plants en masse. Ideally, plant a particular variety of plant in groups of 3 or more for maximum appeal to butterflies. For example, include 3 butterfly weeds, or 5 asters, in your design. Butterflies locate plants by sight as well as smell, so the more of their favorite plants you have in your garden, the better. Grouped plantings are often more visually appealing to humans as well. Lastly, do NOT use pesticides! You will kill the very butterflies you are trying to attract! Make sure you purchase pesticide-free plants. Some nurseries do not grow their own plants—a grower produces plants for them. You must make sure that the nursery's grower has not treated the plants with pesticides. When in doubt, don't buy—if the plant looks perfect, it has likely been treated with pesticides—you WANT to see chew holes in the leaves!

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There are several “tricks” you can use to entice native lepidoptera to your yard. First, it is extremely important to include native host plants in your garden. Host plants provide food for caterpillars. Each species of caterpillar will eat only certain plants. Some caterpillars will feed on a variety of plants, while others will feed on only one specific type of plant. For example, monarch caterpillars will feed only on milkweed, while luna moth caterpillars will enjoy hickory, sweetgum, and walnut tree leaves. By including these host plants in your landscape, you will provide food for caterpillars. And since female butterflies lay their eggs on

host plants, you will also encourage female butterflies to linger in your garden--and you will attract males who will come looking for the females! To find out which host plants support the butterflies in your area, visit your local library, or check the North American Butterfly Association website at [www.naba.org](http://www.naba.org) and your state's Department of Natural Resources for more info.



Photo Credit: Candy Sarikonda

A second trick to entice butterflies to your garden is to include nectar plants. Nectar plants provide food for adult butterflies. But not just any flower will do. Butterflies prefer certain types of flowers, with lots of nectar. Many cultivars have been bred to be more showy or compact, and thus the nectar has been bred out of them. But native plants have co-evolved with our native lepidoptera, and these plants provide the nectar that butterflies depend on for life. By providing nectar-rich native plants throughout the growing season, you will entice a variety of butterfly species to your yard. Some of the best native nectar plants include milkweeds, sunflowers, coneflowers, Joe-pye weed, hoary vervain, wild bergamot, blazing star, susans, phlox, mint, buttonbush, New Jersey tea, asters and goldenrods. Experiment with nectar plants in your yard, and see which plants the butterflies enjoy most. In my yard in Northwest Ohio, butterflies LOVE my milkweed, New

England asters and stiff goldenrod. You may find they like something different in your yard. So don't be afraid to try a variety of plants. Once you find something that works, plant lots of it and tell your neighbors!

Make sure you design your garden so that you will have nectar and host plants blooming throughout the growing season. Choose spring-blooming flowers like spring beauty, spiderwort and violets, and summer-blooming flowers like common milkweed, wild bergamot, and woodland sunflower. In fall, asters and goldenrods are

unbeatable—and goldenrods do NOT cause hayfever! So enjoy that brilliant gold color in your fall landscape, and watch the pollinators feed so heavily that you can closely observe and enjoy them.

Lastly, when you create a native plant butterfly garden, consider the “look” you want to achieve. You can go “wild” and allow the garden to have a more natural appearance,

something your wildlife will love. Or, you can opt for a more formal appearance. Huh? Natives in a formal garden? Yes, it can be done. The simplest trick? Mulch, and use negative space. In design terms, when you leave space between plants, thus highlighting each plant as a specimen, you are creating “negative space.” Mulch that negative space, and your native plant will have the appearance of a formally-placed cultivar. Also, group specimens of a particular species of plant together. You can place 3 milkweed plants next to each other for a more formal look; or place 3 milkweeds scattered throughout the garden bed for a more natural look. It is entirely dependent upon your preference--butterflies will come either way!

Finally, there are a few tricks I have learned over the years that help specifically to entice monarch butterflies to my yard. Most notably, monarch females prefer fresh, tender milkweed for ovipositing (laying eggs). Monarch

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females can smell milkweed from 1 mile away. By planting more than one variety of milkweed in your yard, you can ensure that a healthy, fresh-looking milkweed will always be present in your yard. For example, in my yard, monarchs like common milkweed and butterfly weed in spring and early summer, and they tend to prefer swamp milkweed later in the summer. Swamp milkweed remains more tender and lush later into the growing season than my other milkweeds. However, to overcome this, I have learned another trick: pruning my common milkweed. Yes, prune it. Not all of your plants, just some of them. I prune about 1/4th of my common milkweed. How? In my northwest Ohio yard, I find that if I use my clippers and prune my common milkweed stems to the ground around July 4, I can expect to have lush, new growth by mid-August. Mid-August is precisely the time when premigrant monarchs are passing through my area, and they heavily lay eggs on my freshly

resprouted milkweed. The only drawback is that the milkweed does not grow back fast enough to produce seed, so bear this in mind if you want to collect seeds. Otherwise, prune away, your lady monarchs will love you for it!

Gardening with natives can be transformative. A garden is a living, breathing organism. We look for meaningful relationships in our human interactions. It should be no different with our gardens. We need to look at them as an opportunity to help our fellow creatures, to interact with and explore the wonders of nature up-close, and to nurture our souls. By making a commitment to garden more meaningfully, we can experience the richness of the diversity of life that would not be seen in a traditional garden setting. Gardening with native plants is a gift of life to be enjoyed for years to come.



Photo Credit: Candy Sarikonda