



## Advice Sheet

# Butterflies in the garden

Butterflies are some of the most visible and attractive insects in the garden. In the summer these “living flowers” are a delight to the eye. Many British butterfly species are in decline, mostly due to habitat loss. Fields and woodlands are lost to development, and modern farming practices reduce the number of wildflowers, on which butterflies depend, in the remaining countryside. While gardens can never replace the countryside, they can be an important resource for many species. In particular, a mass of summer flowers can be a great refuelling spot for butterflies.

There are lots of easy ways to make your garden more attractive to butterflies, who will visit, feed, and some even breed in your garden. And you don’t have to turn your garden into a wilderness to do it! Adult butterflies feed on nectar, the sugary liquid produced in flowers to attract pollinating insect. All you need is a border with a variety of nectar producing flowers in bloom all through the summer.

### Plant a butterfly border

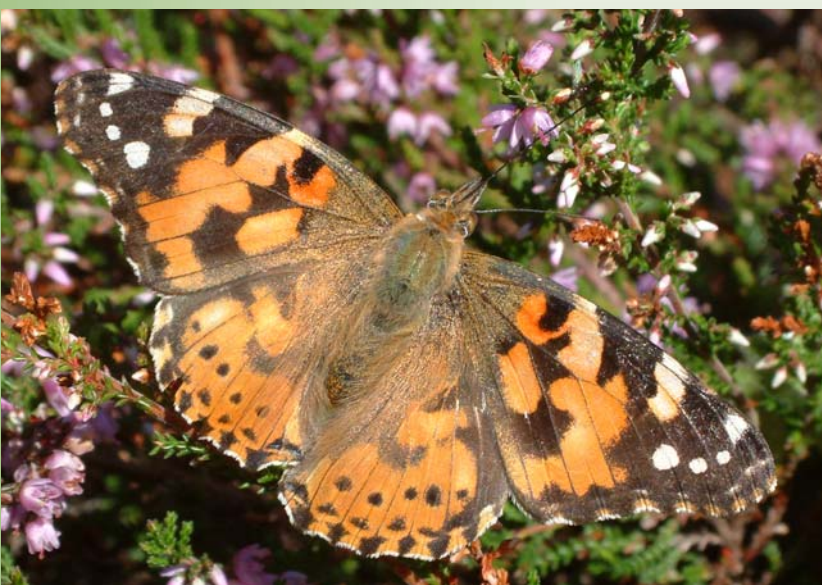
The best site for a butterfly border is a sheltered south facing spot. Butterflies need to warm up before they can fly, and love to bask in the sunshine. They are not strong fliers so need shelter from strong winds. If your garden is very windswept consider planting a hedge. Butterflies will appreciate the shelter provided and a hedge can be a great resource for many other forms of wildlife.

Many garden flowers were once wild plants somewhere in the world. Others have been developed by plant breeders, by hybridising wild varieties and carefully selecting plants with desirable characteristics.

These hybrids are often more colourful than the parents, or have extra petals. Unfortunately they are often sterile, which means they produce no nectar, seeds or berries. Blooms with a dense mass of extra petals will prevent insects from reaching any nectar produced. To feed butterflies choose pure species, and look for simple open flowers. Butterflies like to stand on flowers and probe for nectar with their long proboscis. They like flat flowers they can easily stand on, and heads with many small flowers, so they can browse from one to another. They cannot reach the nectar in deep bell-shaped flowers such as foxgloves, although the latter are worth planting as bumble bees find them irresistible.



*Small tortoiseshell, one of the most common garden butterflies*



*Painted Lady : a migrant from Europe, which in some years arrives in large numbers*



Aim for a succession of flowers, from early spring to late autumn. The greatest numbers of butterflies are in flight in late summer, so this is when you want most flowers in bloom. There are a huge number of flowers to choose from, here are some of the best.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Buddleia</li> <li>Ice plant</li> <li>Aubrietia</li> <li>Michaelmas daisy</li> <li>Honeysuckle</li> <li>Red valerian</li> <li>Honesty</li> <li>Hebe</li> <li>Forget-me-not</li> <li>Aster</li> <li>Wallflower</li> <li>Ivy</li> <li>Heather</li> <li>Cranesbill</li> <li>Golden Rod</li> <li>Globe thistle</li> <li>Lilac</li> <li>Feverfew</li> <li>Grape Hyacinth</li> <li>Ceanothus</li> <li>Globe thistle</li> <li>Hyacinth</li> <li>Marguerite</li> <li>Guelder rose</li> <li>Caryopteris</li> </ul>	<p><b>Wildflowers – why not grow these as a wildflower meadow?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Field scabious</li> <li>Knapweed</li> <li>Purple loosestrife</li> <li>Dandelion</li> <li>Primrose</li> <li>Ox-eye daisy</li> <li>Teasel</li> <li>Cornflower</li> <li>Red campion</li> <li>Yarrow</li> <li>Birds-foot-trefoil</li> <li>Cuckoo flower</li> <li>Clover</li> <li>Corn marigold</li> <li>Sneezewort</li> <li>Bramble</li> </ul>	<p><b>Annuals</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Alyssum</li> <li>Candytuft</li> <li>Cosmos</li> <li>French marigold</li> <li>Lobelia</li> <li>Nasturtium</li> <li>Sweet William</li> <li>Phlox</li> <li>Verbena</li> <li>Pansy</li> </ul> <p><b>Herbs</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Thyme</li> <li>Chives</li> <li>Hyssop</li> <li>Lavender</li> <li>Rosemary</li> <li>Marjoram</li> <li>Mint</li> </ul>
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**Looking after your border**

In very dry weather keep the border well watered - in drought conditions nectar production can dry up.

Avoid using chemical pesticides, you might kill the butterflies you have put effort into attracting. Organic gardening benefits many forms of wildlife, and by creating a varied ecosystem with many predator species pest damage is minimised, although it can never be totally eliminated.

Bare gaps between plants will encourage weeds, why not fill any gaps with colourful, nectar-rich annuals.

Regular dead-heading will extend the flowering season of many annuals and perennials.

Be observant. On a sunny day spend time in your garden (or a friends, or even a public park) and see which flowers butterflies spend most time on.



*Peacock butterfly*



## Caterpillar food plants

The larvae of the butterfly is the caterpillar, which feeds almost non-stop until it is large enough to pupate into an adult butterfly. Most caterpillars are fussy about what they eat, feeding on only a few food plants. This makes it difficult to cater for more than a few species in the garden, but it can be worth the effort.

The common nettle is the food plant for caterpillars of red admiral, small tortoiseshell, peacock and comma butterflies, so let a patch of nettles grow in sunny corner. Cutting part of your nettle patch in mid-summer encourages fresh new growth for late season caterpillars; the cuttings are great for the compost heap!



*Caterpillar of the Large White, here feeding on nasturtium leaves*

Both large and small white butterflies are sometimes known as cabbage whites because of their caterpillar's depredations on cabbages and other brassicas. They will also feed on nasturtiums.

The caterpillar of the orange tip naturally feeds on garlic mustard and cuckoo flower, but it will also feed on honesty. Honesty is also worth growing as the flowers are an early-season nectar source.

The holly blue butterfly usually lays its eggs on the flower buds of holly, but late in the season it lays on ivy - ivy is useful for many other butterflies as it flowers very late in the season, when little else is available. Dense mats of ivy also provide over-wintering sites for those butterflies which hibernate.

Caterpillars of the common blue feed on birds-foot trefoil, which can be grown in borders or as part of a wildflower meadow.

The caterpillars of grassland butterflies such the meadow brown and gatekeeper feed on meadow grasses – but not on a mown lawn! A patch of long grasses managed as a wildflower meadow will allow them to breed as well as supporting a host of other invertebrates.

## Hibernation

While a few butterflies are migratory, most must survive through our winter. Some over-winter as eggs or pupae, while others such as the small tortoiseshell hibernate as adults. Sometimes butterflies will find their way into sheds, greenhouses or garages to hibernate; if you can leave them undisturbed until spring.

Dense tangles of vegetation, drifts of dead leaves, and piles of sticks and dead flower stems are all possible hibernation sites. Resist the temptation to tidy up the garden too much in autumn, to leave plenty of cover for over-wintering insects.