

The Birds and the Butterflies: Part 2

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After reading [The Birds and the Butterflies: Part 1](#) (June 2009), we appreciate that caterpillars munch on leafy native host plants so that the larva can metamorphose into the winged splendors. The next question is, "How can we attract adult butterflies to beautify our yards?" That answer depends on what kinds of butterflies you want to attract. Before addressing the common lepidopterans which pollinate flowers, let's realize that butterflies might sip from other sources. For example, many species slurp water and dissolved minerals from mud puddles. Other species, such as wood nymphs and mourning cloaks, prefer tree sap (especially oak) over nectar. Harvesters drink aphid honeydew; keep these guys in the neighborhood since their carnivorous caterpillars eat aphids! Perhaps the hackberry emperor butterfly finds the most unusual food sources, preferring rotten fruits and dead animals over flowers!

Maybe we would not want to lure the hackberry emperor butterflies into the yard, so let's turn towards attracting a broad butterfly spectrum with prismatic native wildflowers. Lepidopterans drawn by flower nectar include swallowtails (such as Eastern and tiger swallowtails), purples, skippers, sulphurs, and monarchs. Many butterfly species frequent blossoms in the aster family, such as New England asters (*Symphotrichum novae-angliae*), smooth blue aster (*Symphotrichum laeve*), and New York ironweed (*Vernonia noveboracensis*). On hot summer days, butterflies flock to the widely pollinator-popular hollow Joe-Pye weed (*Eupatorium fistulosum*); these flopping stalks reach seven feet tall with the tops exploding into huge, pastel pink blossom clusters. Assorted butterflies may gulp nectar from shrubs, like buttonbushes (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*). The milkweed family also draws scores of butterfly species. In addition to hosting monarch larvae, adult monarchs, tiger swallowtails, pearl crescents and others frequent milkweed blossoms, including swamp milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*, which come in pink or white variations) and vibrant orange butterfly weeds (*A. tuberosa*). The pearl crescent is one species also frequenting black-eyed Susans (*Rudbeckia* sp., especially *R. hirta*, *R. triloba*, and *R. fulgida*). Numerous lepidopterans sip from *Rudbeckia* and other cone flower family members, including purple cone flowers (*Echinacea purpurea*) and native sunflowers (e.g., *Helianthus angustifolius*, *H. occidentalis*).

As with insects, live flowers attract avian pollinators. [Hummingbirds](#) are the primary pollinators of cardinal flowers (*Lobelia cardinalis*), and masses of these scarlet blossoms will invite the little aerial acrobats. Be sure not to dead-head the sunflowers, cone flowers, and black-eyed Susans since they become natural birdfeeders for gold finches and other seed-eaters. White-breasted nuthatches and woodpeckers gladly fill their stomachs with acorns and various wild nuts during winter months and feed upon insects throughout summer. Recollecting "Part 1," native plantings tempt invertebrates looking for sap or fresh greens, and those bugs attracts insectivorous birds (wrens, thrashers, flycatchers). Gardeners selecting berry-producing native plants draw birds with both a palette for bugs and/or fruits. Catbirds and mockingbirds are major berry consumers and love fresh blueberries and deerberries (*Vaccinium* sp.) about as much as people do! Other big berry producers are serviceberry (*Amelanchier arborea*), flowering dogwood (*Cornus florida*), gray dogwood (*C. racemosa*), native *Viburnum* (e.g., *V. acerifolium*, *V. prunifolium*), American black elderberry (*Sambucus nigra*), black cherry (*Prunus serotina*), and red mulberry (*Morus rubra*), to name a few. Attract winter foragers and awaken the dormant landscape with color by choosing winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*), American holly (*I. opaca*), red or black chokeberries (*Photinia* sp, previously called *Aronia* sp.) and American beautyberry (*Callicarpa americana*).

With so many native plants suitable for wildlife, who needs invasive [butterfly bushes](#) (*Buddleja davidii*) or [Russian olives](#) (*Elaeagnus angustifolia*)? Sometimes, commercially available native seed packets offer to turn a plot into an instant bird or butterfly garden; they might work but usually wildlife gobbles the sprinkled seeds before germination. Beware of certain mixed seed packs containing non-native species, such as the invasive Chinese *Lespedeza*. With a properly landscaped yard, who needs birdfeeders? Still, for those who like filling the feeders, use native grains as much as possible and avoid seed mixes with invasive, non-native kernels. A great birdfeeder benefit is all of the "bait-birds" mooching a free meal themselves attract hawks and falcons looking for fast food. I've seen a couple of raptor stake-outs spring into an aerial engagement! Natural blossom nectar is more nutritious than the artificial mixes in hummingbird feeders. Furthermore, the hummingbird host plants finish blooming in early September,

when the birds need to migrate South for the winter anyway. Maintaining the feeders after Labor Day encourages hummingbirds to stay longer than they should and the birds risk death from cold and/or starvation from when they finally migrate along their route lined with dormant plants.

Above all else, never use pesticides on wildlife gardens lest you kill the animals you wish to attract!

Working with native plants, anyone can turn any plot of land into a welcoming wildlife oasis. Best of all, these striking gardens encourage balanced ecosystems. For more information on bird and butterfly gardens, explore these references:

<https://www.dgif.virginia.gov/wildlife/habitat/>

<https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/sites/parks/files/assets/documents/nature-history/greenspring/infosheets/butterfliesandmoths.pdf>

<https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/sites/parks/files/assets/documents/nature-history/greenspring/infosheets/nativeplantsforbirds.pdf>



Figure 1. Tiger swallowtails descending upon Joe-Pye weed in the author's backyard.

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