

Information sheet re: Butterflies

You may think butterflies lead a lovely life, as you watch their flutterings – but their lot is not an easy one.

Lend them a helping hand by planting a butterfly buffet!

Do you recall the panic that set in during the fuel shortages? Petrol stations that managed to get a delivery were besieged by needy and greedy motorists who were desperate for a few drops of unleaded. Well, imagine a similar situation but with a shortage of one of life's essentials –water perhaps or even chocolate! The whole country would go mad in a matter of hours.

By now you'll have some idea of what it's like to be a butterfly –a beautiful creature with a painted wing frantically searching for some food on a warm summer's day. Quite apart from the fact that the slightest breeze will blow you hopelessly of course, imagine finding every flower you visit devoid of life giving nectar. Things really couldn't get much worse, particularly if you have only a matter of days to live.

So if you have a soft spot for peacocks, red admirals or painted ladies why not make sure your own garden caters to their every need? You don't have to create a patch of unkempt meadow to provide food plants for the adults and juvenile caterpillars -----just think about their requirements and plan their floral menu accordingly.

Food for thought

The plants we're looking for are those offering a ready supply of nectar –an added bonus for us is that they will attract pollinating bees and are some of the sweetest smelling flowers around.

Aim to have a good selection of nectar –rich shrubs and perennials in flower from early spring through to the last days of autumn. Certain butterflies hibernate during the winter, so some early flowering food plants are particularly important.

The vast majority naturally bloom in mid-to late summer and fortunately (or because of this) most butterflies are also on the wing at this time.

As gardeners we seem to want our flowers to be ever more colourful, larger and with twice the number of petals. Compromise a little and those brightly hued wins will make up for any shortfall in flower impact. Avoid cultivated varieties with double flowers –the ruffled petals are practically impenetrable to a butterfly 's proboscis, the long feeding tube that sits coiled under its head,

Take cover

It is easy to see why butterflies prefer to go about their daily business unhindered by rain and strong winds. I imagine having a couple of golf umbrellas strapped to your back as you tend the garden or do the shopping- the slightest breeze would put even the most firm footed gardener or shopper to the test.

So make sure some plants are sited in a sheltered spot. Near a south facing wall is ideal, because as the wall warms up during the day it creates rising thermals that lift the butterflies effortlessly up into the sky.

Bed and Breakfast

All butterflies start their lives as eggs, which are laid on the leaves and stems of plants that the parents know the emerging caterpillars will like to eat.

The caterpillars gorge themselves for a few weeks and then turn into a chrysalis that may hang from the plant or develop just under the soil. In time this splits open and the young butterfly takes to the skies.

One of the best food plants for caterpillars are stinging nettles and a few can normally be allowed to flourish in a sunny spot at the back of a border or by the compost heap. Red admiral caterpillars love them. Purple flowered Honesty is another good food plant although this time it has some decorative merit: The orange tip caterpillar enjoys the leaves butterflies are attracted to the blooms and gardeners and flower arrangers adore the papery seed heads. A plant that fulfils three roles- now there's one we should all be planting.

Taken from article by Mike Pilcher