



Floating Butterflies © Ambient Ideas/Shutterstock.com; Red Butterfly in Forest © Mary Ann DeSantis

BY MARY ANN DESANTIS

BUTTERFLY Bliss

Symbols of freedom, nature and even our very souls, butterflies capture our attention with their effortless flights and perfect beauty. Butterfly gardens, however, may not be the picture-perfect garden oasis you envision, but that unkempt look is exactly what these exquisite creatures want.

The milkweed leaves are chewed around the edges... the once-lush parsley has been reduced to bald stalks... the lantana grows out of control... this describes my butterfly garden perfectly. But the unruly garden space outside my lanai attracts a profusion of butterflies, so I must be doing something right.

“People who have butterfly gardens can’t expect them to be beautiful all the time. The purpose of the host plants is to be eaten,” explains Anna Williams, a Marion County Master Gardener whose specialty is butterfly gardening. “Butterflies don’t care what the garden looks like; in fact, they prefer it not to be picture perfect.”

First-time butterfly gardeners should start with the easiest plants to grow. Williams recommends milkweed as a host plant where Monarch butterflies can lay eggs that will eventually become ravenous caterpillars. She says herbs, such as parsley and fennel,

also make good host plants where Swallowtails and other butterflies will lay eggs. Just as important are the nectar-producing plants, like Zinnias, which feed the butterflies once they emerge from the chrysalis.

“The plant list provided by the county extension services is excellent,” says Williams. “We’re lucky because everything grows in Florida.”

Two types of plants are needed for successful butterfly gardening. Eggs and larva need host plants; once butterflies emerge, they need nectar-producing annuals for food. And keep it simple. Williams says butterflies like plants that are uncomplicated and make it easy to get to the nectar. Many of the newer hybrid plants do not have scents to attract butterflies or have overlapping blooms, which make it harder for the butterflies to remove the nectar. She’s personally had good luck planting Zinnias, nectar-producing plants that offer lots of color.

“A variety of plants offers you more chances to attract butterflies,” she says. “And remember, not every kind of butterfly comes every year.”

She tells of her own personal experience with her Dutchman’s Pipeline Plant that Swallowtails would eat right off the trellis in past years.

“This year, we’ve not seen one Swallowtail,” she says. “Butterflies

come in cycles. Monarchs may be plentiful one year, then not so much the next.”

Most beginners, Williams believes, make the mistake of trimming the plants too often or pulling up milkweed that is missing its leaves. She tells people who want butterflies to let their gardens grow naturally. She also says be very careful about pesticides and insecticides—and not just the kind lawn services use but also common, everyday varieties that many gardeners spray around flower beds every day.

“Chemicals will destroy plants and caterpillar eggs,” she says. “If the wind is blowing when chemicals are being applied, it can ruin a plant for the butterflies.”

Williams became a certified Master Gardener with the University of Florida IFAS/ Marion County Extension Service after moving to Summerfield eight years ago. She had been a Master Gardener in Virginia for five years before retiring and loved the program so much that she decided to pursue it after her arrival in Florida to learn about the plants that grow here. She began specializing in butterfly gardening six years ago and now chairs the butterfly component for the Master Gardener series.

Norma Samuel, who handles Urban Horticulture for the IFAS/ Marion County Extension Service, says the Master Gardener course

