

# Butterfly Gardens

by Dr. Gary Noel Ross

Gary Ross' Backyard Butterfly Garden Imagine a small wood-framed house nestled within a patch of colorful flowers swarming with graceful butterflies. Although difficult to believe, this picture-book setting was indeed common throughout much of the United States in the not-too-distant past.



But alas, over the past several decades we industrious Americans have become more and more urbanized and less and less domestic. And one result of this "modernization" has been the replacement of those hand-tended flower beds with border plantings of evergreen and shrubbery.

The new look is certainly more convenient. But this newness is also relatively monochromatic and totally uninviting to the myriad of creatures dependent upon nectar and pollen for food.

Fortunately, America's urban landscapes are once again being reshaped. The so-called "cottage garden" with its complement of fluttery visitors is experiencing a renaissance. A new environmental consciousness is sweeping the nation. Homeowners yearn to re-create a bit of nature on their home turf. Teachers realize the value of outdoor classrooms for the teaching of ecological relationships. Even savvy business establishments have gotten into the action with novel marketing strategies featuring wildflowers and butterflies. All have learned that landscaping for butterflies is relatively simple, requiring only meager investments of time, energy, and finances.

## ROSS's RULES FOR A BUTTERFLY-FRIENDLY GARDEN

### How does one create a butterfly-friendly garden?

- First, select a sunny, relatively draft-free location. Both plants and butterflies require a bright, warm environment to thrive.
- Second, prepare a planting medium that is loose and moderately fertile. A mixture of sand, river silt, pine bark, and aged barnyard manure is ideal.
- Third, elevate the bed for good drainage. Soggy soils promote root rot and other fungal diseases.

- Fourth, select plant species favored by butterflies (incidentally, most are attractive to hummingbirds as well). Although any flower will probably perk the interest of some butterfly, there are plants that are time-proven favorites. For example, butterfly bush, butterfly weed, and lantana are guaranteed to magnetize any butterfly within the general vicinity.
- Fifth, include several host plants (species that are used by specific butterflies for reproduction). Host plants encourage butterflies to remain within the garden. Remember, however, that host plants will be heavily defoliated by the butterfly's caterpillar stage.
- Sixth, do not use chemical sprays within the garden. These chemicals not only kill indiscriminately, but discourage butterflies from visiting because of their harsh odors.
- And finally, be patient!



If your garden is located in a highly developed neighborhood, insect guests may have a difficult time discovering your banquet table. But butterflies can and do learn. Also, schedule your observations during peak times for butterflies: mid-morning to mid-afternoon, and between August and October.

That's it. Follow these simple rules and you, too, can experience the joy and peace associated with what is often referred to endearingly as nature's "dancing flowers."

Much of the text of this web page is taken from an article which appeared in DEQ's Louisiana Environmentalist magazine. Both the text and the photographs are the work of Dr. Ross. For more detailed information on butterflies and creating butterfly gardens, see one of Dr. Ross's books, especially *Gardening for Butterflies in Louisiana* and *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Butterflies*. These titles, as well as the poster *Louisiana Butterflies*, are available at local libraries, garden centers, and bookstores, or from the Natural Heritage Program of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, 2000 Quail Drive, Baton Rouge, LA 70808, phone - (225)-765-2821