

A FEW NECTAR SOURCES FOR BUTTERFLIES AND BEES

by Don Dubois

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Several years ago I began converting my backyard from a wildlife free zone into a more hospitable environment by incorporating Texas native plants. Over 250 species of native plants have been planted, with 200+ surviving and supporting local wildlife despite receiving only rainwater and no fertilizer.

The backyard garden has attracted more than 80 butterfly species, with 12± listed as new records for Montgomery County, including a rare hummingbird, the Green Violet-ear. The view changes with seasons and weather, giving an ever-changing look.

Butterflies, bees and hummers have shown distinct preferences for several nectar sources. For bees, blooming trees are popular, along with prairie clover (*Dalea compacta*), beebalms (*Monarda* sp.), vervains (*Verbena* sp.), penstemons (*Penstemon* sp.), thistles (*Cirsium* sp.) and prairie parsley (*Polytaenia texana*).

While not everyone welcomes thistles, other plants listed should have wider use in home gardens and "pocket prairies."



L to r, Retame Tree, Prairie Clover, Prairie parsley, Tiger swallowtail on Lindeimer's beebalm.

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Bumblebees and carpenter bees dominate on Retama tree (*Parkinsonia aculeata*) blooms. Butterflies and hummers join bees on beebalms and vervains. Favorite beebalms are Lindheimer's (*Monarda lindheimerii*) and Peter's Purple Monarda (a hybrid of *fistulosa* and *bartlettii*).

These are tall, as are many of our prairie natives. Allow for expansion. Don't plant at the front of a bed. Lindheimer's beebalm is hard to find but Peter's Purple is available at most good nurseries.

Of the penstemons, Prairie penstemon (*Penstemon cobaea*) is showiest and Gulf Coast Penstemon easiest to grow. For Heller's penstemon, a Texas Hill Country beauty, ensure good drainage. Smaller bees and various wasps (including rare sightings) are drawn to prairie parsley blooms, as are black swallowtail caterpillars.

Our three blue and one white mistflowers are the very best butterfly attractors. In late spring Gregg's mistflower (*Conoclinium greggii*) begins the show, followed by the white mistflower (*Ageratina havanensis*) and wild ageratum (*Conoclinium coelestinum*).

Fall is finished in spectacular fashion with fragrant mistflower (*Chromolaena odorata*), whose bloom period coincides with the fall monarch migration and infusion of tropical species into the Greater Houston area.



L to r, Peter's Purple monarda, Gulf Coast vervain, *Penstemon triflorus* (Heller's Beardtongue), *Penstemon cobaea* (*Cobaea beardtongue*)

Another great late summer/ early fall attractor is ironweed (*Vernonia missurica*), a magnet for painted lady butterflies. Rounding out the spectrum are liatris and standing cypress (*Ipomopsis rubra*), which attract hummingbirds, bees and butterflies.

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Host plants are critical for monarch butterflies as they pass through Texas in spring. Native milkweeds that do well here are green milkweed (*Asclepias viridis*) and Butterflyweed (*Asclepias tuberosa*). Butterflyweed does double duty as both a nectar source and caterpillar host plant.

Some good nonnative butterfly nectar plants include the purpletop vervain (*Verbena bonariensis*) and Azure Skies heliotrope (*Heliotropium amplexicaule*). These are long-flowering, tough perennials.

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