

Butterflies: Stars of a Pollinator Garden

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Butterflies enjoy great popularity, even among people with an aversion to bugs. They are beautiful, with rich coloration and striking patterns. They are (mostly) large, and easy to observe and photograph. One more reason for the affection we have for butterflies: caterpillars, the only kind of insect larva most five-year-olds would recognize. There are about 750 butterfly species in the United States. Most people could identify one in particular: the monarch. But in a garden with a rich floral landscape, you might see 10-20 species; here I highlight 17 common butterflies, beginning with the most underappreciated group.

Skippers, family Hesperidae. These are likely the most abundant butterflies in a typical garden or park. They're small (~3 cm/1 in). Most are orange, brown, or dusky. They have a darting manner of flight (hence the name, skippers!) and antennae that end in a hook. The largest group is the grass skippers, named for the larval host plants. They are immediately recognizable for the “jet plane” wing posture, with fore and hind wings held at different angles.



Woodland skipper, a western grass skipper.



Zabulon skipper, an eastern grass skipper.



Checkered skipper, a spread-winged species common across the United States. Note the hooked antennae.

Gossamer-wings, family Lycaenidae. Small (~3 cm/1 in), often colorful butterflies, many with hind-wing tails (“antennae”) or spots (“eyes”) that lead predator attention away from the vulnerable body. Many are limited to natural habitats (like bogs) or specific larval host plants. The species most likely to occur in a city garden or park are hairstreaks, particularly the gray hairstreak, which has the advantage of a broad variety of host plants, including clover, roses, and oaks. Hairstreak caterpillars have a mutualistic relationship with ants: they exude a sweet secretion that attracts ants, which in turn offer protection from predators.



Gray hairstreak. Look for a unique behavior: they rub the hind wings against each other while feeding.



Eastern tailed blue. Common in the eastern US, and on the west coast where it has been introduced.



American copper. Known for combative territorial behaviors.

Whites and sulphurs, family Pieridae. You have probably seen cabbage whites more than any other butterfly species—though given their drab coloration, you may have mistaken them for moths. If you have a vegetable garden, you also know the fuzzy green caterpillars, which are major pests for cabbage and broccoli. Sulphur butterfly species are similar in size (~4 cm/1.5 in), with yellow or orange coloration.



Cabbage white. White-to-green color, with one (male) or two (female) forewing spots.



Clouded sulphur, the most common of the sulphurs. The faint border makes this one a female; males have a strong black border.

Swallowtails, family Papilionidae. The butterflies most likely to astonish. Most swallowtails bear signature extensions to the hind wings; all are large and decorated with colorful

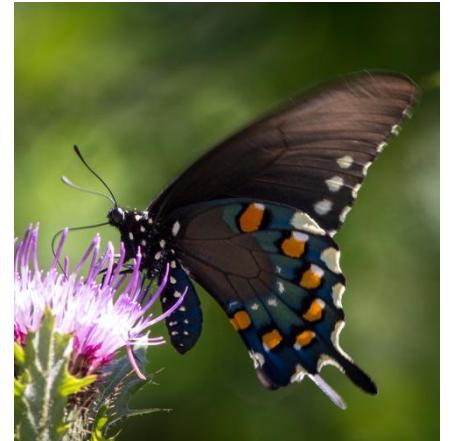
stripes and spots. Black swallowtail caterpillars are common in gardens, as they feed on parsley, dill, and related plants.



Tiger swallowtail. The most observed swallowtail in the US (iNaturalist).



Black swallowtail. The second most observed swallowtail.



Pipevine swallowtail, the third most observed swallowtail.

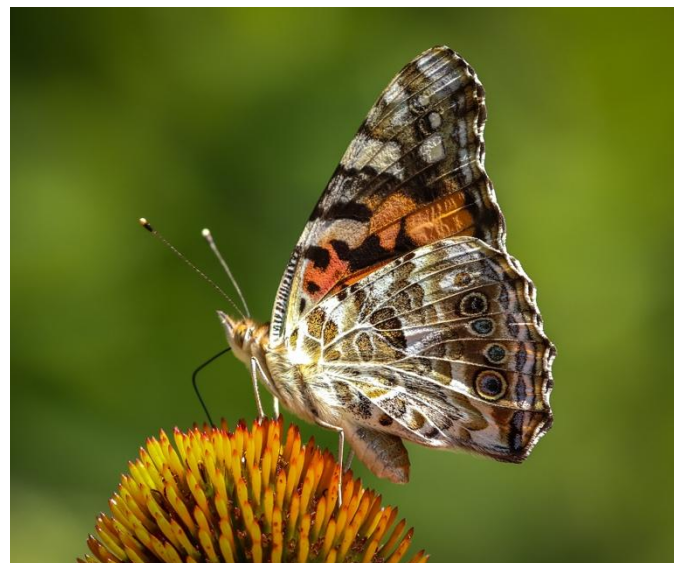


Black swallowtail caterpillar.

Brush-foots, family Nymphalidae. Like swallowtails, brush-foots are large and showy. They have a unique feature: they stand on four legs, with the third pair of legs being reduced. The monarch is the famous exemplar of the brush-foots, known for its spectacular migration and for its vulnerability to habitat loss due to its dependence on milkweed.



Above: The monarch, legendary migrator.
Right: The painted lady, the most widely distributed butterfly species, is also migratory.

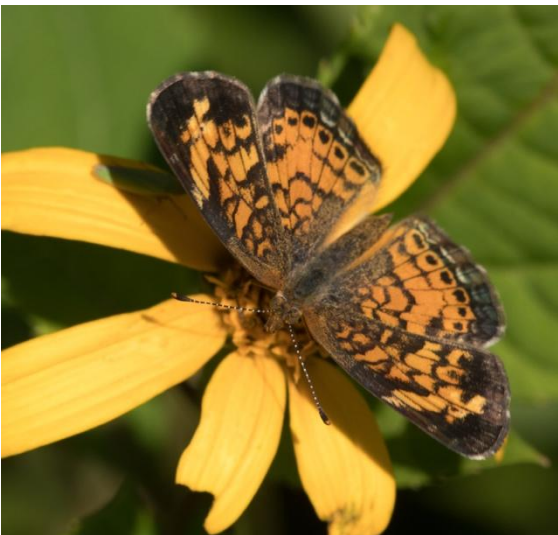




Great spangled fritillary. A large (~10 cm/4 in) butterfly with reflective silver spots.



Buckeye. A medium-sized (~8 cm/3 in) species that occurs in most of North America.



Pearl crescent, a small species particularly fond of asters.



Mourning cloaks overwinter as adults, so they are among the first butterflies of the season. They don't visit flowers, feeding instead on sap or carrion.

There are many websites dedicated to butterfly biology and identification. A good place to start: iNaturalist, the community science site that makes IDs from photos you upload. How reliable is it? I submitted each of the images from this article and obtained an accurate species identification every time. Learning the species for your area is certainly

worthwhile, but consider that a first step. How does it fly? What flowers does it prefer? Can you catch it mating? Any butterfly can be appreciated for its beauty, of course, but also as an active participant in garden ecology.