

Native Plants for Butterfly Gardens

Now is the time to start planning if you intend to attract butterflies, hummingbirds, or songbirds to your yard next year.

Most hummingbirds are west of the Rockies so there is not a lot of variety in the Mid-Atlantic region. The Ruby Throated Hummingbird (*Archilochus colubris*) is the most common in Virginia, but the Rufous (*Selasphorus rufus*) are regular visitors. The Magnificent or Refulgent, (*Eugenes fulgens*) Black Chinned (*Archilochus alexandri*), and Allen's hummingbirds are rare visitors. <https://www.beautyofbirds.com/hummingbirdsvirginia.html>

While you may select showy native or non-native flowers for your garden, you should also consider the availability of native host plants for caterpillars. While butterflies take nectar from a variety of plants, egg-laying females have a definite preference for native plants, many species preferring a specific plant upon which they lay their eggs. It is logical that more butterflies will be present near where they lay their eggs and their caterpillars mature. When the eggs hatch, something will be eating that plant – and caterpillars eat a lot.

Butterflies are grouped into families: Swallowtails (*Papilionidae*), Whites and Sulphurs (*Pieridae*), Gossamer Wings (*Lycaenidae*), Metalmarks (*Riodinidae*), Satyrs/Browns (*Satyridae*), Milkweed Butterflies (*Danaidae*), and Skippers (*Hesperiidae*). Within each group, there are a number of species. If one wants to see showy Swallowtails, it is not likely that a Two-Tailed Tiger Swallowtail (*Papilio multicaudata*) will be drawn here from its normal range (British Columbia to Baja, Mexico) regardless of what you plant. As its name implies, the Spicebush Swallowtail (*Papilio troilus*) prefers the Northern Spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*), a native shrub that grows to a height of 6' to 12' for a host. The Spicebush is also the host plant for the Promethea Silkmoth (*Callosamia promethea*). A preferred host plant for the eastern species of Tiger Swallowtail (*Papilio glaucus*) is the tulip tree (*Liriodendron tulipifera*), common in Lake Ridge forests. The Zebra Swallowtail (*Eurytides marcellus*) prefers the pawpaw (*Asimina trilobal*) which is present but much less common.

LRPRA residents are fortunate to have swaths of forested common grounds and easements to support a diverse population of native plants and animals. While much of the understory has been destroyed by overbrowsing and non-native invasive plants have displaced native species, it is still more than many suburban neighborhoods can enjoy. This environment will provide more host plants as native trees and shrubs are restored and invasive non-natives such as mile-a-minute vine and garlic mustard are removed. You may recall that garlic mustard not only displaces the toothwort (*Cardamine diphylla*), host plant for the endangered West Virginia White (*Pieris virginianensis*) and several other butterflies, but also poisons the caterpillars – see Lake Ridge Today Sep 2017, page 16 <https://indd.adobe.com/view/36b5e428-157b-46e1-ae9b-e1c7be6fdc7d>

Do not take plants from the common grounds. Many, such as the colorful Butterfly Weed rarely survive transplants from the wild, even by professional horticulturists.

Butterflies are a popular book topic, so there are a lot of good references describing species, range, and host plants – even hatching the eggs. I used [Attracting Butterflies & Hummingbirds to Your](#)

Backyard by Sally Roth to prepare this article. If you have friends in this project, buy different books and share.

Note: Why do I need all of these Latin names? Common names are not specific and often shared by multiple plants or animals. With the Latin, I can be sure that I convey to the reader the correct plant or animal.