

Create a butterfly paradise

There has been much in the media about the effect our last two wet summers have had on UK butterflies. Nature writer **Jenny Steel** offers some simple steps to turn your garden into a haven for butterflies with love on their minds

Buddleia bears beautifully scented blooms in late spring/early summer and is much loved by many species, such as this peacock butterfly



Surveys carried out by the organisation Butterfly Conservation have revealed that even our most common species, including the garden favourite the small tortoiseshell, have declined dramatically in some cases to the point of causing concern about their long-term survival.

Those most at risk are butterflies that already have small populations in isolated locations, such as the high brown fritillary; species whose requirements are very specific, including the black hairstreak or butterflies on the very edge of their natural range, the swallowtail being an example.

Changes in our butterfly populations occur all the time, but a decrease of 45 per cent in the number of small tortoiseshells is cause for much concern. Other figures from the survey reveal huge decreases in numbers of migrant species such as painted lady and clouded yellow.

Is nectar enough?

Wildlife gardeners are used to the idea of providing nectar for everyday insects. Many common nectar-feeding insects, especially honey bees and bumblebees, pollinate our fruit, vegetables and flowers, and it makes sense to welcome them to our gardens for that reason alone. These beneficial insects along with hoverflies, ground beetles, ladybirds and lacewings have been elevated

in their status over the last few years and are now seen by most gardeners as useful creatures to have around, which they certainly are.

Butterflies, however, are a rather different story! Die-hard allotment holders and less well informed gardeners will still persecute all butterflies (and of course moths) on the grounds that they eat everything in sight, their caterpillars nibbling away at leaves of precious plants.

More enlightened gardeners provide nectar plants, but as numbers continue to decline, is simply providing nectar enough to help our native butterfly species? As gardeners who see the wildlife around us as an important part of the garden ecosystem as a whole, what can we do to help to reverse the loss of some of our most beautiful native insects?

The British Trust for Ornithology and the RSPB regularly release figures which show that garden bird feeding and the provision of nest boxes has helped our native birds. Perhaps we can apply a similar logic to helping our butterflies. Growing the usual butterfly nectar plants is a good start, but encouraging breeding is the most positive action we can take. So how do we go about this?

LEFT: The flowers of sedum are a great late summer source of food for this red admiral

Food for thought

Nettles are often recommended as good caterpillar food. Useful as they are to some species of butterfly, there is a common misconception among the uninitiated that 'leaving nettles for the butterflies' is the only thing (excuse?) that one has to do in the garden to help these insects. As with so many aspects of providing for our local flora and fauna, it's not as easy as that! Small tortoiseshell, red admiral and peacock butterflies do all lay their eggs on nettles and the caterpillars therefore eat the leaves, plus comma and painted lady will sometimes use them, although they have other preferences – comma prefers hops and painted lady, thistles.

Leaving a clump of scruffy nettles in a shady place – under a tree or behind the garden shed – will also be of no use. Other insects (including some species of ladybird) will use nettles in this sort of situation, but butterflies are creatures of warmth and light and they like their nettles in just such a situation. Nothing but the sunniest, warmest spot in your garden will do and fresh young nettle leaves are preferred.

Living in a rural location, I don't *intentionally* leave any nettles for breeding butterflies in my garden, as there are masses in the fields all around me. Inevitably, they find their way into the garden and I keep an eye on them for butterfly activity, but most of those that grow in the shady parts are composted.

However, our nettles, whether you want to grow them deliberately or not, cater for only five of the 20 or so species that you could attract to your garden. Other larval food plants for all of these are a lot more attractive and easier to handle than the stinging nettle, so set your sights at helping some of the most beautiful of our native insects – the stunning orange tip, elegant ringlet, dazzling common blue and wonderful butter yellow brimstone.



Nettles are good food plants for several species of butterfly, but only if growing in full sun

Favourites you can help

THE ORANGE TIP

The orange tip is one of the 'white' butterflies and has declined considerably (26 per cent) in recent years. This was a butterfly of wet meadows, laying its eggs on the spring flowering lady's smock, sometimes known as cuckoo flower. This delicate plant with its pale mauve flowers was once a common sight in country meadows along with cowslips and in some locations snake's head fritillary.

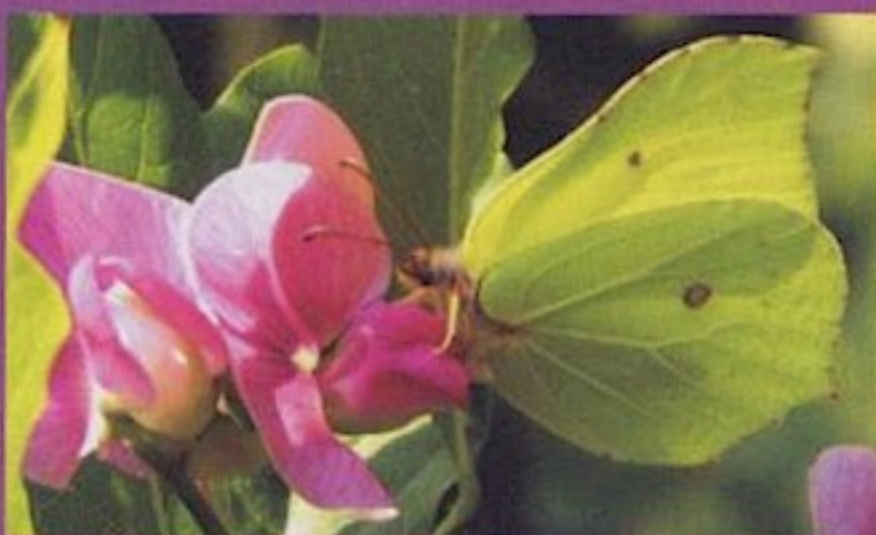
Its other larval food choice is the hedge mustard or jack-by-the-hedge. This useful wildflower is edible, imparting a lovely hot garlic taste to salads, or it can be cooked. This is easy to grow at the base of a hedge, or lady's smock will thrive in a damp patch next to a pond. A further, very attractive alternative is honesty, which this little butterfly will use in the absence of the other two species. Useful in any wildlife garden, honesty's violet flowers, which also provide nectar for the adult butterflies, are followed by the familiar 'moon penny' seed pods containing seeds so large and nutritious they will keep greenfinches entertained for ages.



The orange tip can be attracted with lady's mantle, garlic mustard and sweet rocket

BRIMSTONE

This is the yellow-winged harbinger of spring, another easy butterfly to encourage to breed. This insect is more particular than some others in terms of laying its eggs and only the two species of buckthorn, purging and alder, will suffice. These are easy little shrubs to grow: alder buckthorn prefers damp acid soils and purging is happier on drier lime rich substrates. The female (cream coloured) brimstone can detect the scent of this plant from some distance. Buckthorn can be tucked into a hedge or grown among other shrubs. If there are brimstones in your area, they will find it.



The brimstone is a real harbinger of spring

THE BLUES

The blue butterflies are a group of tiny, bright-winged insects that in general live in quite specialised habitats, but the common blue is relatively easy to encourage to gardens if its larval food plants are available. First choice is bird's foot trefoil, which is easy to grow at the front of a border, in a scree garden, on a living roof or in short grass. Bear in mind though that if you plant it in grass you will not be able to cut it for a couple of months in the summer. If this sounds a bit too problematic and you have a pond, try growing greater bird's foot trefoil – a plant of boggy meadows and waterside habitats. The common blue will use it just as readily and it's a lovely plant to enhance a wildlife pond.



The diminutive blue butterflies such as the common blue can be attracted into the garden with bird's foot trefoil

RINGLET

Lastly is the elegant ringlet. Strangely, this butterfly actually increased in number last summer, possibly due to the timing of its breeding season. This lovely butterfly, and meadow brown, gatekeeper, large and small skipper and several other species all deposit their eggs on native grasses and their caterpillars feed on the grass leaves. Only a meadow will do for them, so leave some long grass in a sunny corner and see what happens.



The ringlet butterfly thrives in meadowland

Grow a wild banquet

Helping butterflies to breed, just as we have aided garden birds such as blue tit and great tit, house sparrow and robin with carefully designed nest boxes, could well make a difference to butterfly numbers in the future. Many common birds now rely on our gardens for food and shelter. Maybe as conscientious wildlife gardeners, we can do the same for some of our most beautiful butterflies. If you plant both nectar plants and larval food plants, you could expect 20 or more species of butterfly to visit your garden instead of just a handful.

GROWING NETTLES

Nettles need to be in a sunny and sheltered spot for butterflies to use them. Make sure there are young fresh leaves by cutting them back in April and don't get your hopes up! Nettles in gardens are not often used by butterflies, although other insects will use them. Butterflies seem to prefer larger patches in the countryside.

PLANTS FOR BREEDING BUTTERFLIES

Try growing lady's smock, garlic mustard, poppies, bird's foot trefoil, native fine-leaved grasses such as the fescues, wild sorrel (for the small copper butterfly), honesty and buckthorn.

MAKE A SMALL MEADOW

Leaving an area of grass in your garden uncut could encourage the butterflies that use native grasses as a food plant. Even better, take up an area of turf and sow a native grass mix. Even without any wildflowers, this will still make a good habitat for wildlife and may attract meadow brown, gatekeeper and speckled wood, which are the brown butterflies that most commonly visit gardens.



Maintaining a patch of long grass or meadow will provide butterflies with nectar and food for caterpillars

DON'T FORGET NECTAR FLOWERS

Buddleia, echinacea, catmint, sedum, poppy, michaelmas daisy, scabious – there are butterfly nectar plants for every garden. Do a bit of research to find out what's best for your soil.



Field scabious thrives in chalky soils. The flowers appear from June to October



Find out what grows best in your garden and select wild flowers to suit your conditions, such as these common poppies

WHY BUTTERFLIES DON'T DO WELL IN WET WEATHER

There are several reasons why butterflies don't thrive in poor summers. Firstly they can't fly in pouring rain, which means there are fewer chances of mating and laying eggs, and equally important is that both eggs and caterpillars are prone to fungal diseases in damp conditions, meaning that the next generation is much reduced in numbers.

Suppliers of wild flower seeds

Many of the larger seed companies stock a small range of wildflowers and themed wildflower mixtures, but for specific plants you may need to try a specialist

- Nicky's Nursery;
tel: 01843 600972;
www.nickys-nursery.co.uk
- Boston Seeds;
tel: 01205 280069;
www.bostonseeds.co.uk
- Kiss My Grass;
tel: 0800 883 0169;
www.kissmygrass.co.uk