f by chance you are one of those admirable people who has decided you are done talking and will now Do Something for our environment, perhaps even more specifically for the environment of children, then you may wish to consider creating a butterfly garden on your school grounds. For now, disregard that by doing so you’ll be helping these whimsical insects. Never mind that support will come quite easily because students, parents, and teachers alike will be charmed by your proposal. Don’t even be swayed by garden recipes calling for certain trees which will happily serve double duty as shade makers. Ignore how pretty it will be and how sweet it will smell and how many others like hummingbirds, bees, spiders, song birds, and reptiles will joyfully partake of the garden’s bounty, drawing you on to connect with the whole wide world. Even overlook the pride and knowledge that will flutter into your school community. Just do it because it’s fun!

Selecting a site
So how is it done? Quite simply, butterfly gardens are shaped by the needs of butterflies themselves. While some of these needs vary among species, others are common to all. You should start by selecting a location that receives at least six hours of full sunlight per day and is not exposed to excessive wind. Being cold-blooded, butterflies must absorb heat until they have warmed sufficiently for flight. Gravel paths, large flat rocks, or nearby evergreens absorb heat and provide ideal spots for basking. An area of shrubs with leaf litter or trees will provide niches for the butterflies to shelter in.

For the health of your plants, a well drained site is important, but moisture must be available too because many butterflies engage in “puddling,” a feeding activity whereby they gather on damp places to absorb essential minerals, particularly sodium. If you don’t have a persistent puddle or seep present, you may be able to create one, or you can fill a bucket almost to the rim with sandy soil, submerge it in the ground, keep it moist, and place a few perching twigs or rocks on its surface. If you choose to use wood for structures such as steps or retaining walls, be certain that it is untreated. Toxins in treated woods leach into the soil and can be absorbed by the plants the butterflies will feed on.

Choosing plants
There are a number of things to consider when choosing nectar flowers. Butterflies are attracted to certain colors, and the ease with which nectar can be extracted through the proboscis is also critical. Butterflies generally have a passion for purples.
and are also attracted to bright shades of red, yellow, and orange. Single bloomers and flowers with flat tops such as black-eyed Susan, cosmos, and aster, or flowers with short tubes such as lupine, all have accessible nectar. Tough, drought-resistant perennials which successively span a lengthy bloom time should be favored while any non-native invasive flowers should be avoided.

There are no generalizations to be made for larval food plants. Caterpillars are very particular to their host plant, although more than ten species of butterflies do lay their eggs on either trembling (quaking) aspen or cottonwood. Still, monarchs are particular to milkweed, red admirals to nettles, and some swallowtails to willow. Still others fancy certain grasses or thistles, and on it goes. And you thought kids were fussy!

To match leaf to mandible, you will need to determine which butterflies inhabit your region. Consult books, the Internet, and your local naturalists’ society. Naturalists may be able to provide you with a list of local butterflies and perhaps even direct you to a nearby butterfly garden for a first-hand look at desirable plants. Once you know exactly which butterflies to expect in your garden, you will be able to select the larval food plants. A final consideration on plant selection is to avoid any that produce toxic fruit; check your plant book or contact your poison control center about any dubious plants.

If your plant list grows too long and begins to seem overwhelming, it is feasible to tailor your garden to the needs of only a few butterflies, perhaps those now locally endangered. You can always plan for a second phase to be undertaken at that idyllic time in the future when you’ll be ready to cater to all caterpillars. Of course the ultimate option is to incorporate the butterfly garden into a larger naturalization plan, using it as the catalyst to create an ever-expanding oasis of nature.

Obtaining plants
Once you’ve created your plant list, you may find that obtaining native plants presents some difficulties. Some garden centers do offer natives for sale, but ascertain that these are nursery grown rather than collected from the wild. If you find, as we did, that you must buy from a wholesaler to obtain some of the plants, be aware that they can sell out of stock well in advance of spring and often have minimum order requirements. We were able to increase our wholesale order to the minimum and raise funds at the same time by offering a plant sale to the community. This had the added benefits of providing an opportunity for others to purchase native species, community education, and increased distribution of these plants in gardens throughout the neighborhood. We also grew many flowers and larval food plants from seed, both perennials and annuals; this was cost effective and we avoided nursery grown plants which are usually sprayed with pesticides.

Designing and planting your garden
Prepare the garden site by removing any unwanted plant life and digging in a generous amount of garden-mix topsoil. Plan the layout considering perimeters, paths or stepping stones for access, and placement of the plants. Design the garden so that taller plants are at the back, or in the center if you are planting an “island.” It is also advisable to group smaller plants of the same variety so that they grow to form clumps, making a bolder visual splash for attracting wayward butterflies. You may decide to work in stages, planting trees and shrubs in the fall followed by the flowers in the spring. Just prior to our big planting day, we found it helpful to place labels for each of our plants in the garden, then mark their location on a sketch. Even though someone had fun switching a few of these labels around the night before, our sketch helped us to set things right and volunteers easily found the proper spot for each plant.
Once your garden is planted, you can add to its appeal on special occasions by providing tasty trays of rotting fruit; some butterflies like this. If shelter is lacking, you can purchase or build butterfly boxes for this purpose. (Check a nature supply shop.)

We completed our project by putting together an album that included pictures, a newspaper article about our garden, a map, and other related information that had accumulated. The album is available for reference — and for showing off!

**Maintaining the garden**

The last hurdle to clear is maintenance. Adding a generous layer of organic mulch (not bark mulch) is a wonderful method of keeping down weeds and preserving moisture, although weeding and watering must still be attended to. We were fortunate in having 20 parents volunteer to water the garden through the first summer, enough so that each had to do this only once to provide the garden with a twice weekly watering. Maintenance for the first two or three years will be more intensive than in future when the plants will have established themselves, but be aware this is an ongoing concern and one of the biggest stumbling blocks to any greening project. Wouldn’t it be great if school districts could be convinced to take this on with all the gusto they give to grass cutting?

As for me, I have a confession to make. My involvement in our school’s butterfly garden project was the repayment of a long overdue debt. The first time I saw what I now know was a swallowtail caterpillar, it was dangling from the lips of my seven-month-old son. I shrieked hideously, yanked the poor creature from my startled son’s gums and flung it across our yard. The fact that this smooth-skinned, many-footed, horned, and fakely bespectacled thing had been in my baby’s mouth was so revolting, I never stopped to consider the poor caterpillar. Distasteful as the experience was (for me; I can’t speak for my son), I would be much more reasonable the next time. I would gently reprimand my son for trying to eat the poor creature, and I’d tenderly place the caterpillar on a willow leaf. After all, I’ve come to know caterpillars and treasure them, and I believe that through the garden we planted, others learned this too.

By the way, if you bought that line about doing all of this just for fun, by now you are quite likely harboring the dark suspicion that it also involves considerable work. So allow me to simply wish you joy in the endeavor.

Kim Denman is a writer in Surrey, British Columbia, where she assisted with the butterfly garden at Hyland Elementary School.

---

*Barbara Chamberlain*

Above: A butterfly box. Below: Monarch butterflies raised in the classroom are released on a butterfly bush at Crestview Public School, Kitchener, Ontario.