

Patio Plants for Birds and Butterflies

Whether you have a large yard or not, you may want to encourage birds and butterflies to come to your doorstep. Flower pots and hanging baskets can encourage a variety of species to perch on your patio for close up observation. While native plants may be preferable for natural areas--especially in regions with cold winters--patio plantings allow you to grow exotic tropical species that can be interesting to friends and wildlife.

Some considerations when planning your patio garden:

Containers: Numerous materials and styles are available. Plastic pots are lightweight, inexpensive, and durable. Drain holes in the bottom are essential because plastic pots retain moisture better than pots made from porous materials such as unglazed clay or wood. Ceramic pots tend to be more expensive and are often quite heavy compared to plastic. Large planters can be made from rot resistant wood. Even in outdoor locations, it is advisable to put saucers under the pots to catch drain water that can stain decks and patios.

Consider what you want to plant before selecting a planter. Choose a planter large enough to accommodate the plant. Inadequately sized pots will require frequent watering and will look out of proportion with large plants.

Potting soil: Planters should be filled with a potting mix that is well drained, yet will hold some water. Because of the limited rooting area provided by the pot, ordinary garden soil usually is not suitable--it tends to be too heavy and does not drain or retain moisture as well as organic potting soils.

Light: The amount of sun that your pots will receive should help you determine what to plant. If your planters will be in sunlight most of the day, make sure the plants you select require full sun. If you have a shady patio, select plants such as impatiens or snapdragons that require, or at least tolerate, less direct light.

Watering: Depending on the size of the pot and weather conditions, plants may need to be watered daily. Check frequently and water as needed. If frequent watering is necessary and your time is limited, you can purchase automatic watering devices for pots.

Choice of plants: The choice of plants is boundless. Vegetables, flowers, and even vines grown on supports will do well in pots. Nasturtiums, petunias, and impatiens are attractive to hummingbirds and grow well in pots. The pendulous fuchsia is a favorite for hanging baskets and also attracts hummingbirds. Pots planted with herbs such as parsley and dill can provide fresh herbs for personal use and food for swallowtail caterpillars. Monarch butterflies and other species are attracted to lantana, cosmos, and zinnias. Other butterfly plants suitable for pots include verbena, marigolds, hibiscus, and asters. Vines suitable for larger pots and attractive to butterflies include bougainvillea and morning glory.

Be creative and have fun. Even if the plants you choose are not the favorites of any birds or butterflies, enjoy them yourself!

For more information on wildlife habitat and other Backyard Conservation practices, contact your local conservation district or the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Or call 1-888-LANDCARE (toll free) for a free colorful Backyard Conservation booklet and tip sheets.