

How to: Improve your garden for Butterflies and Moths.



Most of our butterflies and moths declining because of big changes to the countryside since the 1950s. Most cannot fly far from where they emerge, so if they don't find the right habitat in which to feed and breed they die out. Inside our gardens we can try to set the balance right again- by good management and growing the right plants for them. Even a small garden is already a collection of many tiny habitats close together, and if lots of people grow the right plants we can make a habitat stretching across town and country for them to increase again.



Small tortoiseshell butterfly on Michaelmas daisy Photo: Caroline Harcourt



Striped lychnis caterpillar on dark mullein Photo: Sandra Jones

Target species:

Common [garden species](#), perhaps with some less common ones depending on your location.

How to do it:

- Review your existing garden plants for their benefit to butterflies (see our lists below), keep the good ones
- Establish clumps of new plants chosen from our [list](#) of nectar plants for butterflies
- It's best to have nectar plants in sunny places
- Try to have plants that bloom in winter and early spring, late spring and early summer, and late summer and autumn. Look at our lists (below) for help
- Remember you need to provide food for larvae (caterpillars) as well as adult butterflies. Look at our [list](#) of butterfly caterpillar plants. Not many of these are common garden species, so see what wild plants you can bring in to help the butterflies.

- If you are keen to help moths, look at our [list](#) of recommended plant species. This is much shorter, partly because there are so many moth species that practically *all* plants will help some moth caterpillars, and because so much less study has been made of their needs.
- When planting, it is generally better to have larger clumps of fewer species than single plants of lots of species.
- If you dead-head your plants, it makes them produce more flowers
- Your lawn can support garden butterflies if you let it grow long. See our How-to sheet on lawns
- **Never use pesticides** – they will kill the insects you want as well as the ones you don't!

How easy is it to do?

Quite easy, but take your time and evaluate the effects your changes are making.

How much will it cost?

Most cost will be in buying new plants and seeds, compost and pots. Individual garden centre plants cost from £5 to £12 each but bought as tiny plugs they are much cheaper at about £1 each, but you should grow them bigger in pots before putting them in the garden. Seeds are very cheap – between £2 and £4 a packet, and often with *hundreds* of seeds. Sow and raise plants to swap with neighbours. Raising your own plants from seeds will be cheaper but takes longer and some are not easy. If you join a gardening club you will find other gardeners keen to swap plants or give you cuttings of theirs. This is the best way to get started.

How effective is it for the target species?

Effective, especially if you plant caterpillar plants

Golden rules – what the science tells us

- For butterflies and moths their habitat must include the particular foodplants for the caterpillars, very often unique to each species. For butterflies, nearly all of these are native species, and only a few exotic garden plants are useful to them
- Non-native plants are often excellent sources of nectar, with more blooms and longer flowering than many natives. You will see lots of popular non-native garden plants on [our list](#)
- Insects are cold-blooded creatures so keep your nectar and caterpillar plants away from deep shade.

What to look for?

- Increasing numbers and variety of butterflies visiting flowers in your garden, especially if you have given them caterpillar food plants
- Some leaf damage on appropriate plants. This is often easier to see than to the caterpillars themselves which are very good at hiding. And so, rejoice if you see holes or silky webs on your plants! This is what we *need* to help butterflies and moths, and very rarely does it do much damage to the plants themselves.

Things to be aware of

- It is illegal to dig up plants from the wild. You must get the landowner's permission to collect seed from inside fields, parks or gardens.
- Some plants bought in from garden centres may have already been sprayed with insecticides before they even got to the garden centre. This could harm insects feeding on these flowers. Ask if the garden centre has any information about insecticide use on their plants.
- Keep an eye open for which plants in nearby gardens are attracting butterflies, this could be a good guide for you.

Further information

Plant lists

List of plant species for garden [butterfly caterpillars](http://www.wlgf.org/plants_garden_butterfly_caterpillars.pdf) www.wlgf.org/plants_garden_butterfly_caterpillars.pdf

List of plants used by [butterflies for nectar](http://www.wlgf.org/plants_nectar_butterflies.pdf) www.wlgf.org/plants_nectar_butterflies.pdf

List of plants used by [moths as larvae or adults](http://www.wlgf.org/plants_for_moths.pdf) www.wlgf.org/plants_for_moths.pdf

How to

How to: Improve your [lawn for wildlife](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_improve_lawn.pdf) www.wlgf.org/ht_improve_lawn.pdf

How to: Create and manage a [wildflower meadow](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_meadow.pdf) www.wlgf.org/ht_meadow.pdf

Webpages

List of [plant suppliers](http://www.wlgf.org/plant_suppliers.html) www.wlgf.org/plant_suppliers.html

Our [butterfly page](http://www.wlgf.org/butterflies.html) www.wlgf.org/butterflies.html

Our [moth introduction](http://www.wlgf.org/moths_intro.html) page www.wlgf.org/moths_intro.html

NE booklet Enjoying [moths and butterflies](http://www.wlgf.org/ne25moths_butterflies.pdf) in your garden www.wlgf.org/ne25moths_butterflies.pdf

Butterfly Conservation [website](http://www.butterfly-conservation.org) www.butterfly-conservation.org

Books

Gardening for Butterflies, Bees and other beneficial insects. (2010) Jan Miller-Klein Saith Ffynnon Books

The Butterflies of Britain & Ireland. Lewington R. Jeremy Thomas and Richard Lewington (2019) Bloomsbury Publishing