Getting Started

Butterfly gardening melds two distinctly different activities, butterfly watching and gardening. Gardening involves planning, digging, weeding—more weeding!—watering, and some cleaning up at the end of the season. Gardening is a satisfying and joyful endeavor, despite—or because of—the physical exertion it requires. It creates a version of nature that pleases the gardener. Butterfly watching, even more than gardening, can be tailored to one’s love of, or aversion to, physical exercise: it can entail a simple visit to a public garden to see what butterflies it attracts, or it can involve a daylong hike in a wild area in search of specific butterflies. Whatever the amount of energy one chooses to invest, the goal is to view butterflies, whether for the pleasure of observing their beauty or for the challenge of identifying their species. Gardening always includes some output of physical energy, while butterfly watching might require only the heft of binoculars on the wrist—and some close-range butterfly viewing binoculars are pretty lightweight.

While the number of people who garden far exceeds the number who watch butterflies for recreation, once focused awareness of butterflies enters your gardening world, the interest and excitement that butterflies add to the garden will soon have you hooked. One more activity will be added to your yearly garden routine—but at least watching different species of butterflies flutter around your garden, visiting the flowers you have grown for them, is a task that you can accomplish while relaxing in a lawn chair.

Butterfly gardening is perhaps best defined on the sign that has long been in use by North American Butterfly Association’s Butterfly Garden and Habitat Program, which states: “This garden provides resources that increase the world’s population of butterflies.” The resources in question need not be extensive or elaborate; you can start butterfly gardening by including a few nectar plants and a few caterpillar food plants in an existing garden, in a school garden, or even in patio planters. This simple goal is achievable by almost anyone; even a small garden can play a part in creating habitat for butterflies—you do not need vast amounts of land in order to create a home for these beautiful creatures.
CONSERVATION

The North American Butterfly Association (NABA) has been promoting the conservation of butterfly habitats since the 1990s. This concept may not be foremost on anyone's mind when they browse colorful plant catalogs because, for many people, nature conservation can evoke images of long hikes with groups of sweaty, flannel-clad enthusiasts striking out through bogs with the goal to plant twig-sized saplings for future generations. Yet conservation can also be a simple, uncomplicated act, such as making careful choices of what we plant in our gardens and yards. It is an opportunity; it is something in which just about everyone can participate if interested. You don't need to feel that conservation is a burden you are shouldering as a remedy for all the world's
IMPROVEMENTS MADE TO LOCAL HABITATS will benefit common butterflies, but not all butterflies can be considered common. About 722 butterfly species have occurred naturally in North America, north of Mexico. Many of these butterflies have such specific habitat requirements that a butterfly garden is unlikely to attract them.

Regal Fritillary is a prime example of a butterfly species whose reliance on a unique habitat has directly influenced its population size and density. Once ranging from Maine west to Montana and south to North Carolina and Oklahoma, Regal Fritillary was considered a widespread and common butterfly. However, its livelihood is tied to grassland ecosystems, and this reliance on a disappearing habitat type has precipitated the Regal’s downfall, to the point where substantial populations remain only in Midwestern remnants of tallgrass prairie. In addition, to support Regal Fritillary populations, not just any tallgrass prairie will do; it must be

Regal Fritillary visiting milkweed, an essential plant of the tallgrass prairie habitat and among the preferred nectar plants of Regal Fritillaries.
“high-quality” tallgrass prairie, meaning that these butterflies are discerning about their prairie homes. A high-quality tallgrass prairie will encompass a diversity of both native grasses and forbs, which include familiar flowering plants such as iconic sunflowers and Monarch-friendly milkweeds, and of course violets, the Regal's caterpillar food plant. Fire is another critical feature of a healthy tallgrass prairie; periodic burning of the grasslands unlocks nutrients and rejuvenates the soil surface by clearing away large amounts of dead and decaying plant material, allowing new plants to see the sun, and stimulating seeds to germinate.

When flying about looking for the right habitat, Regal Fritillaries do not carry a checklist of home-buying must-haves tucked under their wings; they decide where to lay eggs based on instinct. All butterflies are hardwired to know what “looks” and smells like a home, and that will be different for each butterfly species. Regal Fritillaries will stop and mate when there is a vast expanse of tallgrass prairie that contains ample amounts of their preferred caterpillar food plants—birdfoot violet and prairie violet. In addition, enough nectar plants of the right type must be available; not enough food or not enough space and Regal Fritillaries will look for their home elsewhere, even if it no longer exists.

Although native prairies are now extremely fragmented and the Regal Fritillary population has dramatically decreased, conservation efforts are underway to protect remnant patches of prairie, and to develop land-management methods that encourage Regal Fritillaries. One of the last Regal Fritillary populations in the East is protected and monitored by the United States Army on the Fort Indiantown Gap National Guard Training Center near Annville, Pennsylvania. This isolated population is stable, and researchers are studying ways to increase eastern Regal Fritillary populations.

Less common butterflies that require specialized habitats do sometimes arrive in gardens but it is not the norm. If your garden is near an already existing population, an uncommon species may stop by, but even then, it takes a perfect alignment of location, weather, plant materials, timing, and luck to entice some species into a garden. Usually if an uncommon butterfly visits a butterfly garden, it is just that—a fleeting visit—rather than the beginning of a breeding colony.

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In the spring, dried plant material left over from the winter will be burned off this Kansas prairie remnant that Regal Fritillaries call home.
environmental abuses; rather, view it as a series of small steps that can go in many directions based on your interests, resources, and needs. Whatever level you take it to, conservation is something that can have a real impact both now and for future generations.

Is conserving butterfly habitat the same as conserving butterflies? In many cases it is the same, since butterflies are so deeply dependent on their habitat. As more suburbs, office buildings, and their attendant roads and small businesses are built, fewer fields, wetlands, and woodlands are left. Suburban development replaces wild spaces with a new, monotonous landscape of concrete, grass lawns, and a small selection of ornamental trees and shrubs, almost none of which supply either nectar for adult butterflies or the specific food plants that butterfly caterpillars need to survive. This loss of habitat reduces the populations of almost all butterflies. Some species, though, which can be called common garden butterflies, normally travel surprisingly long distances to find appropriate food and shelter. Their caterpillars are able to eat either a wide variety of plants or plants that are common even in developed locations. Because of their widespread populations and accommodating lifestyles, common butterflies should be the target group of butterflies to attract for a beginning butterfly gardener.

While many butterfly species are threatened by habitat loss, Monarchs probably receive the most widespread attention of any of the butterflies in this predicament, and in fact, they have become the focus of a conservation effort that spans the entire continent. This effort mainly involves restoring milkweeds, which Monarch caterpillars require as their food plant, but has also brought attention to other Monarch population problems: parasite infestations that increase mortality, lack of nectar availability along migration routes, and even the possible impacts of climate change on Monarch overwintering sites. What makes the Monarch conservation effort so compelling is the Monarch migration—Monarchs fly through much of the United States twice a year on their journey to and from their wintering grounds in Mexico and California. While the overall Monarch population is not in danger of extinction, the spectacular migration could be in danger of disappearing if habitat along the migration route is not protected and improved.

Encouraging and educating gardeners to plant regionally native milkweeds throughout the Monarch migration route is one conservation practice that is simple and can be accomplished in a variety of settings. Since Monarchs inhabit much of the land in the United States, gardeners everywhere can participate in conservation efforts by planting milkweed—home gardeners, schools, highway roadside managers, and nursing homes are some of the places...
where land has been planted for Monarchs. In addition to providing essential caterpillar food for Monarchs, milkweeds attract many butterflies and pollinators to their flowers, so even if you are not in the thick of the Monarch migration route, milkweeds are an important plant for butterflies.

The interaction between milkweeds and Monarchs starts as soon as milkweed shoots push through the earth in spring—Monarchs may be seen laying their eggs on milkweed plants that are just inches tall. There are many different types of milkweed that are native to different regions of the United States, so it is easy to find one that suits each specific gardening need.

As Monarchs begin their migration northward, milkweed plants are just breaking ground. Typically among the later perennials to appear in the spring, milkweeds can be a source of consternation to new butterfly gardeners, who might wonder whether their plants survived the winter. You can cope with this spring shyness by marking your milkweed patch in the fall before the vegetation dies down so the area can be left undisturbed in the spring until the new shoots emerge.

Although formerly considered a common garden butterfly, Monarchs have become much less so as their migration numbers have decreased—so perhaps it should be the first butterfly to consider when planting a garden. Luckily for gardeners, the hardest part of planting for Monarchs might be finding milkweeds to plant, since the conservation effort to save the Monarchs’ migration has created more demand than supply of these very popular garden plants. Milkweed seeds are plentiful, so consider propagating plants from purchased seeds.

Monarchs on their spring migration northward have deposited eggs on young shoots of common milkweed in central Kansas.
CONSERVATION STARTS AT HOME

If you are interested in promoting butterflies and their habitat, how do you create “butterfly habitat”? To start, look around at what is near you already. Some weeds, tree foliage, and wildflowers are eaten by caterpillars of common garden butterflies, as well as of many less-common species. Learning to recognize and protect the different species of trees and flowering plants that are already on your property and used by butterflies is a relatively quick way to start helping butterflies. The protection of existing butterfly-friendly trees, weeds, and wildflowers should be the first step in creating your butterfly habitat without having to buy anything or dig a hole.

START WITH SIMPLE GARDENS

For nearly a decade, the North American Butterfly Association has promoted a program that certifies butterfly gardens. The requirements are easily manageable—the garden needs only three different butterfly nectar plants and three different caterpillar food plants to become certified. Information on choosing regionally useful plants for butterflies is provided on NABA’s website, and NABA chapters serve as resources for beginning butterfly gardeners.

Three different butterfly nectar plants and three different caterpillar food plants in one small garden, or even a patio planting, is not going to decisively tilt the balance of habitat loss. However, it is a starting point for shifting perceptions and habits. Learning to incorporate three different nectar plants in the landscape initiates a change in the way we choose plants. Nectar plants can be beautiful as well as useful—pleasing the gardener while also sustaining wildlife. Caterpillar food plants are often less visually dramatic than nectar plants but can still complement a garden scheme. Using certain shrubs, trees, and vines in addition to flowering perennials and annuals makes it easy to accommodate caterpillars in a garden layout.

RIGHT: Common buttonbush needs a moist site to thrive—a rain garden would be ideal. The summer-blooming flowers are fragrant to humans and butterflies and provide nectar over a long period. Two Eastern Tiger Swallowtails are nectaring on this plant—the yellow individual on the left shows the common coloration, while the “dark morph” on the right exhibits a coloration seen only in female Eastern Tiger Swallowtails where the yellow wing color is replaced with black.

Already existing butterfly gardens can be certified by NABA. Certification signs help begin conversations that can inform others about habitat conservation for Monarchs as well as all butterflies.
TRANSFORMING A GARDEN INTO A HABITAT

The Environmental Protection Agency defines pesticides in part as “any substance or mixture of substances intended for preventing, destroying, repelling or mitigating any pest”—a pretty broad definition that encompasses many substances important to public health and safety. The EPA considers antibacterial soap to be a pesticide but it would not be prudent to suggest that hospitals stop using these soaps just because they are called pesticides. Clearly, great care is warranted when considering the use of any pesticide, particularly in gardens, because one person’s pest (and the caterpillars of some butterflies can be considered pests) might be the creature that you are trying to encourage.
The home gardener can choose from a multitude of products to control both insects and weeds. But when gardens are treated as habitat and the goal is to increase local butterfly populations, many fewer of these products fit into the scheme of butterfly gardening and many of them should be strictly avoided. To put it mildly, the butterflies that visit our gardens do not benefit from applications of lawn and garden chemicals. What butterflies do need is an abundance of caution when it comes to what is sprayed, dusted, or otherwise applied to their environments. Be aware that in your gardening endeavors you are creating a season-long buffet line for the insect’s entire life cycle, from the smallest caterpillar to the largest butterfly. Home and garden pesticides have no place in that banquet.

ISLANDS OF HABITAT

Butterflies, in varying concentrations, can be found throughout the United States. Even in cities, surrounded by concrete, a few species can survive. It might be harder to attract them, and you will have to search harder to see them flitting around your neighborhood, but they are there. In general, butterflies will not be as plentiful in urban areas as in the surrounding leafy suburbs. Move even farther out to the exurbs, which are greener, wilder areas beyond the suburbs, and butterflies will be still more plentiful. The route from urban area to suburb to exurb may cover only 50 miles and may experience the exact same climate throughout. Yet the more buildings, roads, and lawns occupy the landscape, the more butterfly habitat becomes patchier to nonexistent. Small plantings of butterfly habitat, such as those encouraged by NABA, are one way to combat the uneven distribution of homes for butterflies. Each small butterfly garden is complemented by gardens and wild spaces in the same general area to create a mosaic of welcoming spaces for butterflies to reproduce.

Helping butterflies to move between patches of environmentally suitable lands can be accomplished in many ways. Habitat corridors are passageways that allow wildlife to move between suitable environments embedded within unsuitable areas. Such corridors need not be pristine, wild spaces. Drainage
NEONICOTINOIDS, also commonly referred to as neons, are a group of insecticides widely used in farm, home, and garden applications for the control of leaf-chewing and sap-sucking insects. Once a plant or seed is treated with neonics, the insecticide is found throughout the entire plant, not just in the leaves or sap, and remains active throughout the growing season. For caterpillars, which are leaf-chewing insects, a plant treated with neonics is a death sentence. And without caterpillars, there are no butterflies!

For butterflies and other pollinators such as bees that drink nectar, the threats associated with neonic-treated plants are harder to quantify—since neonics are present in all parts of a plant, the insecticide can also exist in flower nectar. The levels of neonics found in nectar are considered sublethal; but even at a low level, the effects of neonics on insect health, behavior, and reproduction are not known.

In order to protect butterflies and their caterpillars:

~ Avoid applying neonics in your yard and garden.

~ When purchasing new plant material, be certain to check that it is labeled as neonicotinoid-free. With each passing growing season, ornamental plant producers and plant nurseries are improving their labeling to show which of their plants are safe for pollinators. Labels are not standardized and must be read carefully to determine if they are declaring the product to be “neonicotinoid-free” or not.

~ If a pest-control professional treats your home or lawn, ask that they use alternatives to neonicotinoid insecticides; neonicotinoids include the chemicals imidacloprid, clothianidin, thiamethoxam, acetamiprid, and dinotefuran.
culverts in southern California serve as passageways for deer, coyotes, and many other animals to navigate between the concrete barriers of roads and buildings for access to whatever limited green spaces are available. For butterflies, though, habitat corridors work best when they approximate recognizable butterfly habitat. As you can imagine, butterflies are more likely to fly through a flower-filled backyard than through a concrete rainwater channel. Butterfly gardening emphasizes both creating pockets of habitat and linking habitats together.

Consider how the garden you create relates to other possible butterfly habitat in your neighborhood. Is there a line of trees and shrubs running down one of your property lines? Adding nectar-producing shrubs to that mix is just one more step to enlarging habitat and promoting connection between habitats. Even non-gardeners can ask their town councils to replace some of the sterile lawnscape of parks with plants specifically needed by local butterflies.
WHERE ARE THE BUTTERFLIES?

The next time a foundation shrub—one of those nondescript bushes that was planted along the front of your house when it was built—finally dies, replace it with a butterfly-friendly plant. In the East, planting northern spicebush to provide food for Spicebush Swallowtail, or redosier dogwood for Summer Azure are possibilities. In southern Florida, you could plant coontie, the sole caterpillar host for the Atala hairstreak.

When considering how to promote islands of habitat, it is apparent that moving beyond the boundaries of our homes and linking up pockets of habitat is essential. The more fully the mosaic of habitat is filled, with either new habitat or improved existing habitat, the easier it is for butterflies to find homes where they can reproduce. The key to helping butterflies in all locations is to provide food. Butterfly gardening requires providing food for two of the four life stages of a butterfly: nectar for adult butterflies and specific plants for caterpillars to eat. Most people start by focusing on nectar-producing flowers, then based on what butterflies they see, go on to provide the food needed by the caterpillars of those species. Once both food sources are in place, an island of habitat has been created.

WHERE ARE THE BUTTERFLIES?

Butterflies are wild animals and the factors that influence their population numbers from year to year, or even season to season, are myriad. Even on a warm summer day, the most desirable habitat may seem to lack abundant flying butterflies. Weather is assumed to be an important determinant of the size of butterfly populations, although it is difficult to show direct cause and effect. Adverse weather that impacts butterfly populations can include a brutally frigid winter, which may decrease the number of overwintering eggs, caterpillars, and chrysalides. A long stretch of cool weather in the spring or summer that coincides with a mating cycle can suppress a butterfly population to the point where butterfly watchers will notice a downtick in numbers; cold butterflies become semidormant and lack the energy to fly vigorously looking for a mate.

LEFT: Spicebush Swallowtail flies in the eastern half of the United States. It is easily distinguished from other black-colored swallowtails by the “missing” orange spot on the hind wing below in the row of orange spots closest to the body. Loved by swallowtails and by hummingbirds, cardinalflower is a good choice for fire-engine-red blooms in midsummer gardens. The caterpillar food plant for Spicebush Swallowtail, northern spicebush, is a much more understated plant, although its haze of tiny yellow flowers in early spring is always a welcome sight and provides nectar for Spring Azurés.

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THE SPECTACULAR ATALA HAIRSTREAK, once a common butterfly in South Florida, declined to near-extinction as its caterpillar food plant, coontie, was severely depleted. Initially, wild coontie plants were overharvested (for processing into a cornstarch-like flour) at a rate faster than they could regrow. Later, as housing development in South Florida escalated, the native, wild coontie population lost further ground, both literally and figuratively.

Luckily, coontie (a cycad) is now recognized as a valuable landscape plant that can be used as a ground cover or small foundation plant. The popularity of coontie among landscapers and homeowners has helped play a part in the rebound of Atala populations, but a problem remains. Atala females lay numerous eggs (up to 60!) and the growing caterpillars feed for a little over two weeks, during which time the coontie fronds can become quite ragged and tattered, if not completely stripped. Atalas actively breed year-round in South Florida, so caterpillars feed at all times of the year. When confronted with shredded shrubbery, some homeowners start to look for a can of something that will kill the problematic chewing insect. Housing and retail developments have no tolerance for landscape plants that are routinely and actively eaten by caterpillars, so this can be a bigger issue with developments than with individual homeowners. NABA volunteers have rescued both coontie and Atalas from colony sites such as abandoned city lots slated for development, as well as from private homeowners who have not yet learned to appreciate the Atala.

For more than a decade, Sandy Koi and Alana Edwards have spearheaded a group of volunteers from NABA chapters and members of the Native Plant Society in Florida’s Miami-Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach counties. Additionally, local Miami-
Dade County staff have acknowledged and supported the project. The same mission inspires all these volunteers: to reintroduce Atalas into productive South Florida habitat. They focus on creating sustainable Atala colonies at previously occupied colony sites. Locations with suitable habitat adjacent to existing colonies are also used as relocation sites, thus enlarging the corridor of habitat where Atalas can roam.

To accomplish this goal, volunteers identify potential locations by canvassing homes and public locations for appropriate Atala habitat. The suitability of each site is carefully checked: it must have ample stands of coontie, plenty of established and appropriate nectar plants, and shade trees where the Atalas can roost and rest. Once contacted and willing to participate, the keepers of Atala foster gardens also pledge to forgo pesticides and to remain on alert for county mosquito spraying. Gardeners can ask that the county not spray their properties, and they must be careful to cover their coontie plants during any nearby mosquito spraying.

One final request by the NABA chapters is that the garden owners monitor their Atala colonies for at least a year so that more can be learned about which landscape practices promote healthy Atala populations. The accumulating population data, completed garden surveys, and input from the colony site owners help to build a comprehensive picture of what a site needs in order to host a persistent Atala colony.

These Atalas are just emerging from their chrysalides and will soon fly off in search of nectar. Some dull, speckled orange chrysalides still hang on the coontie frond, a sign that more butterflies will be emerging soon.
Another factor that may play a role in fluctuating butterfly populations is spraying for mosquitoes and other insects, such as Gypsy Moth, by government agencies. (The spray that kills Gypsy Moth caterpillars kills ALL butterfly and moth caterpillars.) Since the timing and amount of these sprayings may be different each year, their impacts can vary widely.

The best way to get a handle on the location of butterflies is to get outside at various times of the day and observe: Go in the morning when there is still dew on the plants. You might catch a Common Buckeye basking in the morning sun. Walk through your garden right before noon when the air has warmed sufficiently and flower nectar is flowing—Giant Swallowtails may be nectaring on eastern purple coneflowers. Late in the day, be sure to check plants that are catching the last rays of the sun, since some butterflies will still be flying if the air temperature is high enough.

Plan to learn the common garden butterflies and their habits as a first step in butterfly gardening; most of the butterflies mentioned in this book can be found.
in gardens and are considered common. A list of the most common and widespread butterflies is provided in the next chapter. While their population numbers do vary each year, common garden butterflies are common because they have developed lifestyle strategies that allow them to utilize a variety of habitat features. They are not particularly picky eaters as caterpillars, some overwinter as adults, and many are highly mobile, either through migration or simply as large butterflies that are able to range over wide areas.

While you are learning to attract and feed these common butterflies in your garden, you are certain to notice other butterflies there as well. Looking carefully, you might even find a caterpillar or two munching away at a flowering perennial or shrub. The more time you spend looking for butterflies either in

Giant Swallowtails are strong fliers that may briefly visit gardens before quickly flying away. Regular observations at different times of the day may allow you to see a Giant Swallowtail making a quick stop for nectar, like this one nectaring on milkweed.
ONE PLACE TO SEE

Large numbers of butterflies is the flagship project of the North American Butterfly Association—the National Butterfly Center, located in Mission, Texas. Open 365 days a year, the National Butterfly Center was created and developed by NABA as a 100-acre native-plant and wildlife preserve. This wild butterfly nature sanctuary is devoted to education about, and conservation of, native butterflies. Strategically located in the Rio Grande Valley, the National Butterfly Center is considered the butterfly capital of the United States. The subtropical climate of South Texas allows the center to remain open year-round, and the variety of butterflies this region attracts is unique for the United States. The valley is the only place in the country where the northernmost range of many Mexican butterflies overlaps with the southernmost range of a number of U.S. butterflies. As a result, more than 300 species of butterflies have been recorded in the valley, among them many rarely seen species as well as first U.S. records.

The National Butterfly Center’s palapa is surrounded by beds filled with native plants that provide nectar and caterpillar food for butterflies. Used for picnics as well as events, the palapa affords a stunning view of Monarchs, Queens, and Soldiers attracted to palmleaf thoroughwort, also known as Gregg’s mistflower, in the foreground of the photo.

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your garden or out and about, the more you will understand what butterflies
live in your area and what plants they use. Start a record of what you see. It can
be a simple quick photo with a cell phone, which will give you all the informa-
tion you need: the butterfly, the location, and the date. Start with the group of
common butterflies and you will soon see how much fun it is to expand your
butterfly horizons.

FINDING AND NAMING BUTTERFLIES WITH
FIELD GUIDES AND TECHNOLOGY

Butterfly field guides are books designed to help the user identify butterflies.
Observe a butterfly in nature, and then use the information in the guide to
determine the name of the butterfly. All field guides have some similarities;
butterflies are grouped and listed by family, all guides feature images of but-
terflies, and all provide information that will allow the user to narrow down
the butterfly they see in the garden to one in the book. However, there are dif-
fences between guides; one field guide may show multiple angles of one but-
terfly species, another may present only one. Some guides use photographs,
while others rely on illustrations. The many different guide layouts are a boon
for users, making it easy to find a field guide that appeals to each person’s
needs. Consider the purchase of at least one butterfly field guide as one of the
essential items needed for butterfly gardening. As you observe butterflies,
either at home or on field trips, use a field guide to work out the name of the
butterfly. As your list of identified butterflies grows, you can plant the caterpil-
lar foods required by those butterflies, thereby increasing your chances of
attracting more butterflies.

Traditionally designed to be compact enough to take into the field, field
guides are usually paperback and small enough to be easily carried when out-
side. Although the original purpose of guiding a person in the field is still very
valid, many people use their field guides as reference books in the comfort of
their homes. Given the wide range of inexpensive cameras, from cell phones to
point-and-shoot cameras, it can be easier (and fun) to take photos in the field
or around the yard and then compare them later to the field guide. If you choose
this route, be sure to take a number of photos so that different angles of the but-
terfly are observable.

Start using your field guide the moment you get it! Look through it carefully
so that you become comfortable with how the butterflies are presented. Each
guide will have its own style of abbreviations, maps, and species accounts that
are displayed in the most compact way possible. It can be a bit like reading a
secret code until you become familiar with the style of the particular guide. Keep in mind that many field guides are written for large expanses, like the entire United States, while others have narrowed their focus down to regions or states. Personal preference will play a large role in which guide works best for you. Consider the following when making your decision:

- Are you interested in caterpillar and butterfly egg identification? Perhaps a separate caterpillar field guide will also be necessary.
- Do not discount a state-specific field guide that targets a state other than the one where you live. While a field guide from a different state will not be completely accurate for identifying butterflies in your area, some state field guides go into a lot of detail about butterfly habitat and how to tell the difference between similar butterflies, both of which are topics that will enhance gardening for butterflies.
- A field guide is important to have but there are other books on butterflies, often found under the classification of “butterfly biology” or “butterfly gardening,” that can help you learn to identify butterflies. While larger books are not designed to be taken into the field, their size allows more information on butterfly habitats and habits to be presented. In the case of butterfly field guides and their associated reference books, size does not matter; content and how it appeals to an individual are the important factors.
- Field guides assume that you are able to clearly see butterflies but it is often not possible to get close to the butterfly you wish to identify. Close-range focus binoculars magnify butterflies (and other small creatures) and allow butterfly watchers to clearly see field marks referenced by butterfly field guides. These specialized binoculars are available in a variety of prices and many are very lightweight.

Whether your garden attracts scores of active butterflies or leaves you standing alone wondering where the party went is a facet of working with nature. The reality that very little is static in a garden is accentuated when butterflies, or any insects for that matter, become part of the garden’s focus. The creation of habitat for butterflies is an ongoing process, not a fixed point that will ever be perfectly attained.

Habitat can mean many different things to butterfly gardeners, and there is even dissent among the ranks of butterfly enthusiasts as to whether butterfly gardening is actually beneficial. For some, butterfly habitat is simply any location that provides nectar for adult butterflies and food for the caterpillar stage.
of a butterfly’s life. This interpretation would certainly be valid for butterflies that are already living and breeding in your immediate location. Others are concerned that a garden designed for butterflies is no more than a trap that attracts them in unnaturally dense numbers, making them easy targets for diseases and for predators such as birds and wasps. The gardener must ultimately decide for him or herself what the butterfly garden will mean and what a butterfly garden is for. The remainder of this book will arm readers with information to develop their own response to the question “What is butterfly habitat?” Spoiler alert: There is no single answer to this question!

CHECKLIST OF ACTIONS FOR GETTING STARTED

- Join NABA! If one is near you, take advantage of the wealth of knowledge and activities offered by NABA chapters or other nature-oriented clubs.
- Identify local trees, weeds, and wildflowers that currently provide butterfly habitat. Nature centers often offer classes on how to identify local plants. Also, check with your state’s native plant society for plant identification resources as well as educational walks where plant identification is taught. Use online sources as well as printed plant field guides to become familiar with plants that you see. Decide how these existing plants near your home can be protected or their numbers increased.
- If you have not already done so, consider planting milkweed to support Monarchs.
- Find and visit local or regional gardens that promote butterflies or native plants. When visiting a public garden, take note of the plants being visited by butterflies and consider whether they would work in your garden.
- Eliminate your use of home and garden pesticides. If total elimination is not possible, consider limiting the number of pesticides and always use the smallest amount possible to achieve your goal. Moreover, broaden your tolerance of insects—most of them are beneficial or neutral, so be sure you are targeting a true pest when you deploy your death spray.
- Visit a native plant nursery. Ask what plants are locally important for butterflies in your area. Learn to identify three nectar plants and three caterpillar food plants used by common butterflies in your area.
- As you start to notice butterflies, record your observations either on paper or with photographs.