



# Butterfly and Hummingbird Gardens

*by Marilyn Loser*

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It's the time of the year when my mailbox is loaded with colorful garden catalogs. On these unusually cold Alamosa days I dream of summer gardens with brightly colored flowers swaying in the breeze while butterflies dance and hummingbirds dart. I've seen ads for butterfly gardens and for hummingbird gardens. Often, the flower company is promoting particular flowers that attract one or the other fliers. So what does attract butterflies and hummingbirds to a garden?

There are a wide variety of butterflies in the San Luis Valley so I won't go into species detail. "Butterflies are diurnal (active during the day) and have good vision but a weak sense of smell," according to the butterflybushes.com website. "They can see red. Butterfly-pollinated flowers are brightly-colored (even red) but odorless. These flowers are often in clusters and/or are designed to provide a landing platform. Butterflies typically walk around on a flower cluster, probing the blossoms with their tongues."

They like flowers such as those in the family Compositae, where many small flowers are arranged into a flat-topped head. They also like flowers that occur in large clusters such as milkweeds. The individual flowers are typically tubular with a tube of suitable length for butterflies.

Although they have good vision, groups of the same plants are easier for butterflies to see than singly planted flowers.

Adult butterflies – in the beautiful stage – typically only live for two to three weeks. They drink nectar and water. They have mouth parts shaped into a long, coiled tube. "Forcing blood into the tube straightens it out, allowing butterflies to feed on liquids -- they get all their food from this tube," says the University of Kentucky Department of Agriculture (UKDA).

Different species of butterflies have different preferences of nectar, in both colors and tastes. Various websites suggest offering a variety of food flowers during the blooming season to keep the "flutterbys" coming. In addition to nectar, adult butterflies can drink standing water.

Butterflies prefer flowers that grow in full sun, according to the Morton Arboretum, Illinois, website. However, on cloudy days they may prefer to hide in shaded areas.

Butterfly attracting flowers that grow well in Alamosa include asters, black-eyed Susan, butterfly weed, coreopsis, day lilies, goldenrod, lilac, purple cone flower and verbena. Some people have had good luck with butterfly bush but mine have all died. Check out the flower list at [AlamosaFlowers.net](http://AlamosaFlowers.net) for specifics.

To have a true butterfly garden you need to “offer places (food plants) for females to lay their eggs,” according to UKDA website. Hmm! This could be a problem. Butterfly larvae have chewing mouth parts and they can totally defoliate leaves. I haven’t had this happen. Have you? Please let me know!

Eleven hummingbird species spend time in Colorado. There are more than 300 species on the planet, according to the wonderful book “Tropical Nature” by Forsyth and Myata. Did you know hummingbirds’ natural habitat is only in the “new world” – North and South America? Most live in South America. Websites differ on where various hummingbirds nest. The best I can tell, only two – the Broad-billed and Black-chinned – nest in Colorado. Calliope and Rufous are two others that are common here. Typically they arrive in the San Luis Valley in late May and leave in September.

I used to believe that “nectar” (including sugar water from feeders) was what they mostly ate. It bothered me that folks would install hummingbird feeders, keep them filled for a few weeks, and then neglect the feeders leaving the now-dependent hummers without food. Turns out that is not the case. The diet of hummingbirds requires both an energy source (nectar) and a protein source (small insects). The feeders are more like an extra nectar treat.

Many hummingbird-pollinated flowers are red, a color to which bird eyes are sensitive, but which is not as apparent to insects. The hummingbird must hover and reach deep inside the flower to reach the reward. They have a poor sense of smell. A number of sites say it is OK to carefully put fallen babies back into the nest — the parents cannot smell your scent.

Hummingbird attracting flowers that grow in the San Luis Valley include columbine, red salvia, penstemon, morning glory, scarlet runner bean, honeysuckle, bee balm, coral bells, four o’clocks, hosta, lupine, impatiens, and petunias. Again, for information on specific flowers, check out [AlamosaFlowers.net](http://AlamosaFlowers.net).

Be very careful of using pesticides if you wish butterflies and hummingbirds to happily enjoy your garden.

*“Just living is not enough,” said the butterfly. “One must have sunshine, freedom, and a little flower.”*  
Hans Christian Andersen