

Autumn Butterfly Food

In the east of the country, the still warm, and increasingly drier days of April and provide perfect flying conditions for butterflies, and this time of year sees a flush of species in gardens around much of the country. These butterflies have a single purpose in mind, to mate and lay eggs and, to be successful in this, they require sugar-rich liquid food for energy and a host plant on which to lay them. It is the availability of caterpillar food plants (host plants) that governs the health of butterfly populations; as Steve Woodhall writes in his *'Field Guide to Butterflies of South Africa,'* 'butterfly distribution patterns are very strongly influenced by the food requirements of the larvae.' While a few species, like the Skollies, do not feed at all, having had their last meal in caterpillar form, the majority of adults will be in search of laden nectar flowers to fuel their flights, as well as foliage with just the right chemicals to host the eggs.

So, what can gardeners provide through autumn? As with birds, species behaviour and needs affect the flowers they visit, the areas of the garden they feel most comfortable in, and the levels at which they fly and feed. So an extensive range of plants, from groundcovers to trees, will provide for a wider group of butterflies. You may already have noticed how few species are on the wing when clouds shade the sun, or the wind blows. We have little control over those floating sunscreens, but it is simple enough to provide a protected zone in the lee of a shrubbery planted up with butterfly-friendly shrubs that will help to negate the wind. Make sure you provide flowers in both sun and shade areas, and at varying levels; the Painted Lady, Bush Browns, Blues and Hairtail, and Pansies keep close to the ground, while the Swallowtails, in particular, fly at the level of large shrubs and trees. There are also other attractants, namely mud puddles, animal faeces and rotting fruit. Babul Blues, Green-banded Swallowtails love mud puddles.

While many plants are either host species or nectar sources, a few are both, and they are good choices for small gardens where space for trees and larger shrubs is limited. For the purpose of this article, though, we will focus on nectar sources that feed adults through the autumn season.

Sun:

There are few good nectar-producing trees in flower through autumn. The spikey caterpillars of *Acraea Horta*, Garden *Acraea*, can be seen stripping leaves off the *Kiggelaria africana* through autumn, the adults having feasted on flowers, and deposited eggs through the spring and summer. *Ziziphus mucronata* flowers will see many of the Blues and Pies through to the end of April, and the flowering season of *Heteropyxis natalensis*, Lavender Tree, is also coming to an end, having provided sugar-rich energy for many an adult. But there are many shrubs of up to 3- 4 m tall that provide excellent supplies.

The quite beautiful *Barleria obtusa* is in flower in Northern Province, Mpumalanga, and KwaZulu Natal and the Eastern Cape, and feeds the Pansies, Vine-leaf vagrant, plus a variety of other local species. Many gardeners find this plant a bit unruly as new seedlings pop up around the garden, and a single shrub can be quite boisterous as it clambers over other plants. The spectacular blue flowers make it worth the work, though, and it is so easy to control; give it a heavy prune at the end of winter, and a light trim through the year – be careful, though, not to trim off the developing buds. Planted close to the orange or red flowering *Tecomaria capensis* is a stunning site. *Syncolostemon obermeyerae* flowers will be going over now but can be replaced by the magenta plumes of *Syncolostemon densiflorus* and *S. rotundifolia* in all but the coldest gardens. Mix these shrubs with the curling purple ribbons of *Hypoestes aristata* for a Swallowtail buffet, or include as part of a protective windscreen along with *Polygala myrtifolia*, *Buddleja auriculata*, and *B. dysophylla* (for cold regions), also great nectar plants. The flowers of *Gymnanthemum coloratum* (=Vernonia colerata) are always covered in butterflies and insects, bringing in a variety of bird species too. A fast-growing shrub, the Lowveld Tree Vernonia is one of the best wildlife attractants for an autumn garden, an excellent choice for gardens around the country as it is frost and drought hardy. *Crassula ovata*,

Chrysanthemoides monilifera, and *Leonotis leonurus* are popular easy-to-source garden plants to keep butterflies happy. And don't forget the water habitat; *Persicaria attenuata* is both a host and nectar plant for wet areas, as is the lovely indigenous Impatiens, *I. hochstetteri*; plant it in a shady spot close to the water's edge. The slender Blue Boy, *Pycnostachys urticifolia*, looks stunning mixed with other tall seasonal shrubs, like *Leonotis*, the pale blue flowers providing copious amounts of nectar for all garden visitors. Many wild gardens will find the Small-fruit Bar, *Triumfetta rhomboidea*, has set seed; the small yellow flowers and prickly burs cover these annual shrubs through autumn, favourites with all butterflies, and host plant of the Yellow-Banded Acraea. And no garden is complete without the Leadwort, *Plumbago auriculata*. This scrambling shrub flowers profusely and visited by a broad range of adult species.

Perennials and groundcovers:

Members of the daisy family are great favourites of the Painted Lady, *Vanessa Cardui*, common in gardens throughout much of the country. Try autumn daisies: *Felicia*, *Euryops*, *Dimorphotheca* species, and *Helichrysum cymosum*. The Coral Senecio, *Kleinia fulgens*, is a stunner, forming neat mounds of blue-grey leaves and orange-red flat-topped round heads, often with a variety of butterflies in attendance.

The Crassulaceae family (*Crassula*, *Kalanchoe*, and *Cotyledon*) is a one-stop butterfly shop, says Steve Woodhall in an article he wrote for the 2014 Botanical Society of SA, Coastal Branch Indigenous Plant Fair Handbook. This family of mostly succulents will give you a carpet of flowers while providing nectar for adults and food for their caterpillar larvae. *Cotyledon orbiculata* has bright pendulous flowers that attract not only butterflies but sunbirds too. *Kalanchoe longifolia* and *K. thyrsiflora* will always have adults in attendance, the latter being one of the best host plants of this family. *Crassula alba* opens large heads of scarlet (or white) flowers in mid-April and is never without butterflies – or bees. In my garden, *Crassula capitella* (and there are a few different varieties) is a magnet for the Blue Pansy, Garden Inspector, and Garden Commodore. *Crassula multicava* and *C. streyi* take over in May/ June and are just as popular with adults as their sun-loving siblings, in particular, the Black-eyes group of butterflies. These are tiny, and often not noticed by gardeners, but quite charming and very active. Look at the base of the leaves for little eggs. If you can source it, *Dyschoriste depressa* is a most attractive groundcover with tiny white and mauve-marked flowers providing nectar. The *Commelina* species are host plants, though often pulled out as a common weed, and flowers are visited by forest-edge butterflies; in my garden, the Bush Browns are frequent feeders.

Autumn flowers for Cape gardeners: *Ruschia radicans* has a long flowering season, and is popular with adults, though the name is problematic; while many sources give the name *R. radicans*, SANBI sources suggest this name is a synonym of *Antimima radicans*. None-the-less, this lovely Mesembryanthemum is a Western Cape endemic that flowers year round, with a spring and autumn peak. Yellow flowering *Cineraria saxifraga* (groundcover) and *Euryops pectinatus* (shrub), blue and yellow discs of *Felicia amelloides*, and the pink of autumn-flowering *Pelargoniums* should provide a colourful and nectar-filled garden for the few Cape garden butterflies, like the Cape Autumn Widow.

Shade areas:

The lovely *Pavetta* species, *Dombeya pulchra* and *D. tiliacea*, and *Nuxia floribunda*, all with clusters of attractive white flowers, provide autumn nectar aplenty. These are mostly forest edge trees and shrubs that create a woodland/ forest habitat for butterflies like the Evening and Common Bush Brown. *Clematis brachiata* is possibly the most beautiful of the local climbers, and creamy-white flowers spill from forest and woodland trees from late summer to mid-autumn. It is both a nectar and host plant and is widespread, growing in a variety of climates throughout the country. *Xylothea kraussiana*, the African Dog-rose, hosts the Blood-red and Window Acraea's; this is a gorgeous shrub, with dark glossy green leaves, and pure-white flowers with fluffy yellow centres. It does well in light to partial shade. *Peltophorum africanum*, Weeping or African Wattle, is an excellent source of nectar for Highveld and Bushveld gardens, though flowering ends in April, while the Dune Soapberry, *Deinbollia oblongifolia*, provides both nectar and foliage in gardens of the Eastern Cape, KZN, and Mpumalanga, from April to June.

Allophylus dregeanus produces long, slender flower spikes in the understory while *A. natalensis*, with similar flowers, is a sun lover. The former is also the host plant for the Pearl Charaxes.

Plectranthus species all provide nectar, and *Plectranthus hereroensis*, growing in sun and, is the host plant to the beautiful Commodores in both inland and coastal gardens, and the nectar is favoured by the Yellow Pansy in Highveld gardens. The basket grass, *Oplismenus hirtellus*, *Asystasia gangetica* and the Yellow *Justicia* shrub will fill the lower levels. These groundcovers provide for the shade-loving butterflies, like the Common Garden and Twilight Browns, along with the small forest tree, *Allophylus dregeana* that grows in coastal forests. *Hibiscus pedunculatus* offers bright pink bells in dappled shade. *Phaulopsis imbricata* is probably not available in nurseries, but it often seeds itself in gardens close to a wild area source, another reason not to be too quick with the weeding. It is flowering now, but there is little info regarding the plant as a nectar source. It is, however, the host plant for the Common Mother-of-Pearl, and a most attractive groundcover for the wild garden. Those with big gardens or gardeners prepared to hand over a piece of it to the Creeping Foxglove, can provide for a wide variety of species, not only with nectar but with food for caterpillars too, as it is the host plant for many butterflies and moths. The Falling Stars, *Crocasmia aurea*, provides bright colour in the shade and looks beautiful planted around the dark purple or white *Plectranthus* shrubs. Other shade plants: *Bulbine natalensis*, *Plectranthus oertendahlii*.