

Creating a Butterfly Lawn

By Americo N. Bonkewitz, PhD

A lawn, says Durban butterfly expert, Americo N. Bonkewitz, gives us the dose of “green” that we like to see every day to feel “reconnected with nature”. But, we keep it neat for our visual pleasure; it is for us. In nature, there is nothing like a lawn; there are grasslands rather or perhaps very short groundcovers. In our gardens we don’t like natural grass; too untidy, too unruly. In fact, he says, lawn is the most widely grown crop in South Africa, and it’s not one that anyone can eat. It requires a tremendous amount of water and occupies an essential space much of which could be given to indigenous grasses that support the local butterfly population, and need no poisons to control. His advice? Rather than a sterile lawn let’s create a useful lawn, useful for us in that it really does connect us with the local natural environment, and for nature by creating a natural green carpet in which they can live.

Here are few suggestions given at his latest talk at the Durban Botanic Gardens.

How to create a wild lawn

Two ways:

The lazy way: Let the weeds and grasses grow and remove all exotics, letting only the indigenous plants remain, and be happy with that. But, you need to know what is exotic and what is indigenous.

The specialist way: Plant selectively indigenous grasses and forbs. You do need to know your local ecosystem and whether you are targeting a particular animal group: bird garden, butterfly garden or just wildlife garden. It can get complicated.

A butterfly lawn is essentially a habitat for “*The Browns*” (the Satyrid group of butterflies), and you will have to work with grasses that feed their caterpillars. Actually, a **butterfly lawn** is not as much lawn as a butterfly grass groundcover, or a butterfly *grassland*.

You will attract mainly the Common Bush Brown (*Bicyclus safitza*). The male is dark brown and the female lighter in colour, both showing beautiful eye patterns. *Melanitis leda*, the Evening Brown, is a large butterfly with an incredible mimic colouration. This butterfly group is very fond of fermented fruits, and it is common to find them sucking any ripe fruit on the ground.

The butterfly grasses

Ehrharta erecta (Lamarck's Ehrharta or Panic Veld Grass): It is a soft perennial grass that spreads rapidly mainly by seeds and attracts seed-eating birds. Plants can stand shade or semi

shade, and even a sunny spot as long as the area is a bit humid. It has been used in ecological restoration, like dune stabilization.

Pseudechinolaena polystachya (Dwarf Forest/ Basket Grass), requires shade. It is a creeping, short groundcover, excellent under trees and creates a beautiful scene in semi-shaded open spaces.

Oplismenus hirtellus (Basket Grass). It is a common, perennial cosmopolitan grass that requires shade or semi-shade. Its seeds attract various animals and birds. The sticky seeds are easily distributed by animals and humans, easily adhering to fur and clothing.

Setaria megaphylla (Broad-leaved Bristle Grass). A very decorative grass with large broad leaves. Seed attracts birds, particularly Bronze Mannikins.

Engaging the butterfly lawn with other butterfly habitats

Combining with a Swallowtail garden: Plant a few trees, perhaps in the background of your garden, that attract swallowtails to your butterfly garden, like *Clausena anisata* (Horsewood) and *Vepris lanceolata* (White Ironwood). These will provide some shade or semi-shade for the grasses. These species attract Green-banded Swallowtails, Citrus Swallowtails and Mocker Swallowtails. The grassland level underneath the trees will attract Common Bush Browns.

Adding to the lawn a habitat for Pansies: Among the sunny grasses, you can add a few host plants for Pansies, like the Yellow Pansies, Mother of Pearl and Commodores. Plant *Ruellia cordata*, *Dyschoriste setigera* (previously *Chaetacanthus setiger*) and *D. burchellii*, and *Plectranthus purpuratus*. The best way to include these plants is around or near any rockery feature.

Now we need to add some extra attractions for the butterflies by creating small patches of indigenous nectar plants for pollinators, like any of the *Vernonias*, (now *Hilliardiella* or *Gymnanthemum*), *Justicia flava*, *Justicia protracta*, *Scabiosa* species and *Pentas*.

Then the final touch would be to offer the little extras needed by butterflies, like a birdbath full of fermenting fruits for Charaxes and Browns. They love it. And add rockery features for sunbathing. Many butterflies, particularly pansies, like to rest on a stone with their wings open wide to warm up during a cool morning.

Offer a few muddy patches for male swallowtails to do lepidopterists call *mud puddling* behaviour where they drink water containing minerals from the mud. Just completely bury a large container in the ground, add some compost, sprinkle bone meal on top, and fill it up with water – and keep it wet.

Distribution areas:

Butterflies:

Distribution areas are taken from Field Guide to Butterflies of South Africa by Steve Woodhall

Bush Browns: Afromontane, lowland and riverine Forest and bush from W Cape (Knysna area) to Soutpansberg, Limpopo Province.

Pansies: Yellow Pansy: Common and widespread. From W Cape through warmer, moister Karoo areas into Grassland and Savanna of Free State, Gauteng, Kwa-Zulu Natal, Swaziland, Mpumalanga, Limpopo, and NW Provinces and N Cape.

Swallowtails: Citrus: throughout SA. Mocker: Common and widespread. Afromontane forest, along the coast from W Cape (Knysna, George) and mountain chain, into Lowveld Forest of E Cape and KZN, Riverine and montane forests in Mpumalanga and Limpopo.

Green-banded: Common, widespread in wooded area from W Cape (Mossel Bay) to E Cape, KZN, Mpumalanga, Limpopo and NW provinces.

Commodores and Mother-of-Pearl: across the east of the country.

Grasses:

Ehrharta erecta: Eastern Cape, Free State, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, Western Cape

Pseudechinolaena polystachya: Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo

Oplismenus hirtellus: Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, North West, Western Cape

Setaria megaphylla: Eastern Cape, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, North West, Western Cape

Plants:

Vepris lanceolata: Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, Western Cape

Clausena anisata: Eastern Cape, Free State, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, Western Cape

Ruellia cordata: Eastern Cape, Free State, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, North West

Vernonias: there are many varieties across SA.

Scabiosa columbaria: Eastern Cape, Free State, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, Northern Cape, North West

Scabiosa africana: Western Cape

Scabiosa incisa: Western Cape

Justicia flava: Eastern Cape, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, North West

Justicia protracta: Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, Mpumalanga

Plectranthus purpuratus: KwaZulu-Natal; Mpumalanga (3 varieties)

Dyschoritse setigera: Eastern Cape, Free State, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, North West, Western Cape

If you want to learn more about butterfly gardening, then come to my talk, 10:15am every last Friday of the month at the Butterfly Gardening Training Centre at Durban Botanic Gardens.

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About the author: Zoologist and biologist, Americo Nestor Bonkewitz studied Licenciature in Biology at Universidad Nacional del Sur in Bahia Blanca, Argentina and then earned his doctorate in Zoology from the University of Natal (now University of KwaZulu-Natal) in Pietermaritzburg. In late 1990 he started butterfly farming using indigenous species, targeting the breeding of the Emperor Swallowtail. In 2007 he carried out several butterfly surveys in KwaZulu-Natal, in particular, the extensive butterfly and host plant survey of Mkhondeni-Mpushini area in Pietermaritzburg. In 2010 he got involved in a butterfly project with African Conservation Trust establishing four large community-based butterfly domes along the coastal area of KwaZulu-Natal. In 2015 he established the Butterfly Habitat Garden at Durban Botanic Gardens. He now runs several butterfly training courses and invertebrate modules for Bhejani Nature Training. Americo is focusing now on landscaping for pollinators in open spaces as a final tweak/ tune up in forest rehabilitation.