Plants that attract butterflies in North Carolina's Coastal Plain

Larval Host Plants - provide food for caterpillars

**SHRUBS AND TREES**
- Sassafrass (Sassafras albidum), Bays (Persea spp.), Willow (Salix spp.), Oaks (Quercus spp.), Hickories (Carya spp.), Walnuts (Juglans spp.), Wax Myrtle (Morella spp.), Sumac (Rhus spp.), Blueberry (Vaccinium spp.), Rose (Rosa spp.), Holly (Ilex spp.), Red Cedar (Juniperus virginiana), Switchcane (Arundinaria spp.)

**HERBACEOUS PLANTS**
- Carrot Family (Apiaceae): Rattlesnake Master, Snakeroot, Water Parsnip
- Mallow Family (Malvaceae): Hibiscus, Mallow
- Legumes/Pea Family (Fabaceae): Butterfly Pea
- Milkweeds and Butterfly Weeds (Asclepias spp.)
- Grasses and Sedges (Poaceae & Cyperaceae)
- Passionflower Vines (Passiflora spp.)
- Aster Family (Asteraceae): Blanketflowers, Sunflowers, Coneflowers

**NATIVE NECTAR PLANTS**

Herbaceous Plants
- Coral Honeysuckle (Lonicera sempervirens)
- Milk and Butterfly Weed (Asclepias spp.)
- Buttonbush (Cephalanthus occidentalis)
- Wild Bergomot/Bee Balm (Monarda fistulosa)
- Joe-Pye Weed (Eutrochium spp.)
- Blanketflower (Gaillardia pulchella)
- Gayfeather (Liatris spp.)
- Goldenrod (Solidago spp.)
- Trumpet Creeper (Campsis radicans)
- Cross Vine (Bignonia capreolata)
- Carolina Jessamine (Gelsemium sempervirens)
- Meadow Beauty (Rhexia spp.)
- Seashore Mallow (Kosteletzkya virginica)
- Passionflower (Passiflora spp.)
- Sweet Pepperbush (Clethra alnifolia)

**Butterfly Life Cycle**
Butterflies and moths are known collectively as Lepidopterans. There are over 180,000 species of butterflies and moths in the world. Some migrate long distances, while others overwinter in the same location that they spend the summer. Each one has a different life strategy, but all butterflies and moths have a life cycle with four different life stages: (1) Egg, (2) Larva (Caterpillar), (3) Chrysalis (4) Adult (Butterfly or Moth). This life cycle is known as metamorphosis. Some butterflies will complete one life cycle per year, while others, like the monarch, will complete several.

For more information about Butterflies, check out The Nature Conservancy’s science blog:
blog.nature.org/science/citizen-science-butterflies-moths-nature-conservation

For more information about creating your own butterfly garden, check out these websites:
content.ces.ncsu.edu/butterflies-in-your-backyard
carolinanature.com/plants4leps.html

Life Cycle:
- (1) Monarch Egg PHOTO © KEVIN ARNOLD/TNC
- (2) Monarch Caterpillar PHOTO © CHRIS HELZER/TNC
- (3) Monarch Chrysalis; and
- (4) Monarch Butterfly PHOTO © MATT TILLET

Cover:
- Girls in the Garden PHOTO © JUL RACHEL VEAL/TNC; from left: Black Swallowtail PHOTO © JUL RACHEL VEAL/TNC; Giant Swallowtail PHOTO © RAYMOND AUGER TNC; Spicebush Swallowtail PHOTO © JUL RACHEL VEAL TNC;
Butterflies to look for at Nags Head Woods

**D** = documented at Nags Head Woods  
**E** = expected (documented on the Outer Banks)  
**C** = common (likely to be seen in the correct habitat and time of year)  
**U** = uncommon  
**R** = rare  
**XR** = extremely rare

**SWALLOWTAILS**
Large, striking butterflies with hind wings usually displaying characteristic elongated tails
- Black Swallowtail (D,C)
- Eastern Tiger Swallowtail (D,C)
- Palamedes Swallowtail (D,C)
- Spicebush Swallowtail (D,C)
- Giant Swallowtail (D,R)

**WHITES AND SULPHURS**
Medium to small wings that are white, yellow, or orange
- Orange, Sleepy (E,C)
- Sulphur, Clouded (E,R)
- Sulphur, Cloudless (D,C)
- Sulphur, Orange (E,U)

**GOSSAMER WINGS**
The adults are typically small to tiny and may be brilliantly colored when their wings are open
- Azure, Summer (D,C)
- Blue, Eastern Tailed (E,U)
- Elfin, Henry’s (E,U)
- Hairstreak, Gray (D,C)
- Hairstreak, Great Purple (D,U)
- Hairstreak, Red-banded (E,C)

**BRUSHFOOTS**
Vary considerably in appearance; medium to large and brightly and/or uniquely marked
- Admiral, Red (D,C)
- Buckeye, Common (D,C)
- Comma, Eastern (E,R)
- Crescent, Pearl (D)
- Fritillary, Gulf (D)
- Fritillary, Variegated (E)
- Lady, American (E,C)
- Lady, Painted (E,R)
- Monarch (D,C)
- Mourning Cloak (D,U)
- Pearly Eye, Southern (D,C)
- Queen (E,R)
- Question Mark (D,C)
- Red-spotted Purple (D,C)
- Satyr, Carolina (E,C)
- Viceroy (D,C)
- Wood Nymph, Common (D,C)
- Zebra Longwing (E,XR)

**SKIPPERS**
Skippers are small, mostly drab colored butterflies that are named after their quick, darting flight habits. Unlike other butterflies, their antennae clubs are hooked backward like a crochet hook.
- Aaron’s Skipper (E,U)
- Fiery Skipper (E,C)
- Horace’s Duskywing (E,C)
- Least Skipper (D,C)
- Long-tailed Skipper (E,U)
- Salt Marsh Skipper (D,C)
- Silver-Spotted Skipper (D,C)

Come by our Visitor’s Center during office hours for a complete list butterflies and more information about all our Lepidopteron friends!

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What is a host plant?
Think of a host plant as a butterfly nursery. Most caterpillars are very picky when it comes to their diet. Adult butterflies will lay their eggs on the right plant to provide food for the young caterpillars. Some caterpillars, such as monarchs, store toxins from their larval food source that make them poisonous or taste yucky as adults. Others, such as the carnivorous Harvester caterpillar, eat aphids instead of plants.

Where do adult butterflies get their food?
Most butterflies eat nectar. The type of flower that a particular butterfly species prefers will vary depending on (1) the size of its feeding tube, which called a proboscis, (2) the type of color receptors in its eyes, and (3) the size and feeding habits of the butterfly itself. It is best to provide a variety of nectar plants that will bloom throughout the growing season to attract a wide variety of butterflies. You may even attract some moths as many also feed on nectar! Some butterflies don’t feed on nectar but instead prefer to feed on rotting fruit, rotting plants, or tree sap. There are even butterflies that feed on aphid honeydew, a sugar-filled sticky liquid that is secreted by aphids as they feed on plant sap.

Butterflies use their proboscis like a straw to consume nectar
PHOTO © RACHEL VEAL TNC