Many gardeners are bugged by insects but an increasing number of horticulturists have become interested in butterfly gardening. These beautiful creatures symbolize serenity and growth. The adult insects are often recognized, tolerated and even invited but few know the baby butterfly larva as a leaf eating caterpillar. What a contrast - we learn to tolerate leaf damage and allow the young to develop into colorful graceful adults.

Butterfly gardening isn’t difficult once you know the basics. Plants selected are based on butterfly preferences-not human ones. Luckily, butterfly and human favorites are mostly compatible.

The total butterfly garden takes into account the food preferences of both the adult butterflies and their caterpillars. Many butterflies drink nectar from a variety of flowering plants, but their caterpillars often are more finicky. It is not necessary to plant larval food plants to attract butterflies, but adults tend to stay fairly close to the areas where their larval food plants can be found.

There are some commonly available plants which will draw butterflies to your garden. Remember, you will also need to select plants to feed the caterpillars, so you are actually inviting them to dine on your plants.

Of the 760 butterfly species that occur in North America, about 100 can be found in Florida. These do not include the skippers of which Florida is home to an additional 70 species. Skippers have relatively stout bodies and shorter wings than true butterflies. The bean leaf roller adult is a skipper. Moths are different from butterflies and skippers by having fluffy antenna instead of a club at the end. Other differences are that moths are active at night, and tend to hold their wings open while feeding or resting.

There are four stages in the amazing butterfly life cycle: egg, larva, chrysalis (resting), and adult. Butterfly eggs are laid on the larval food plant and caterpillars emerge within a few days. Some species overwinter in this stage. These larva have enormous appetites and do nothing but eat. When their skin is stretched as far as possible, they molt or shed the old skin. After a few molts, they seek a sheltered place. Some spin a safety belt that holds them upside down on a twig or similar object, while others hang on with special hooks on their abdomen. At this time, the final molt takes place and the larva skin is replaced with a stiff butterfly chrysalis (pupa). During this stage, the once worm-like caterpillar transforms into a beautiful, flying adult.

Most adult butterflies found in Florida feed on flower nectar. Some visit a variety of flowers and others seem to prefer a more specialized menu. Butterflies generally are attracted to brightly-colored simple flowers that are not too deep and that are wide enough for good perching platforms. Some universal nectar favorites include: phlox, zinnias, asters, marigolds, daisies, coneflowers, black-eyed Susan, milkweeds, thistles, and butterfly bush.

Flowers in the composite family (e.g., daisies and asters) and flowers in clusters (e.g., milkweed and viburnum) also are good. Double-flowered varieties of cultivated flowers are never as good as the single ones. White varieties are inferior to other colors. Having a wide assortment of flowers is preferable to having just a few different kinds or a variety of similar flower types.

As a rule, small butterflies nectar from small flowers and large butterflies nectar from larger ones. Flowers that produce the most scent generally furnish the most nectar. Nectar also should be available for the greatest number of months possible. Therefore, it is best to choose your flowers so that at least some of them are always blooming.

Many flowers are not designed to be pollinated by butterflies and are seldom, if ever, visited by
Adults of some butterfly species rarely visit flowers but instead are attracted to aphids, manure, rotting fruit, mud, or tree sap. A dish or overripe fruit or a saucer of wet sand are often used to attract these types of butterflies to the garden.

Larval (caterpillar) food plants are suited to specific butterflies. Some plants are food for several different butterflies (e.g., passion vine), but often each species requires its own plant. So, unless you have acres of land at your disposal, you will have to be selective in your plantings for specific butterflies. You also must remember that these plants ultimately will be chewed on if you are successful.

Birds and other predators are quick to eat these larva so few reach adulthood or get large enough to do extensive damage. In fact, very few butterfly species (unlike moths) cause significant problems to vegetable gardens.

Most feed singly or in small groups, as their eggs are laid. Most butterfly gardeners are quite pleased to share their carrots and dill for the pleasure of the company of black swallowtails; they simply plant some extra for the caterpillars.

Of course, if you must, use insecticides very sparingly as they are just as deadly to butterflies as they are to other insects.

Dr. Joe Schaefer, wildlife biologist with the University of Florida, has developed a publication WEC-22 to help gardeners invite butterflies and their larval young. Charts help gardeners select plants for our region of the state. Food and nectar plants which are attractive to specific types of butterflies are listed. The information is available from local nurseries and the Osceola County Cooperative Extension Service at 1901 E. Irlo Bronson Highway. Stop by for a free copy.

Author Pam Traas will be speaking about Butterfly Gardening in Florida at the Agricultural Center on Thursday, March 30, 1:30 to 2:30 PM. Call (321) 697-3000 to pre-register so we have handouts available.

Butterflies are a welcome addition to the landscape. Invite a few into your yard by planting some attractive plants.

Visit the Master Gardeners and over 20 horticulture displays at the St. Cloud Chamber of Commerce’s Southern Lifestyles Showcase next Friday and Saturday at the Agricultural Center. Hours are Friday 9 to 9 and Saturday 9 to 4.