

Butterflies and Beneficials Design Notes

© 2008 Beth Young. All Rights Reserved.

Last month I received an email from Teresa Matteson, tireless worker at the Benton SWCD, asking if I would be interested in designing a butterfly garden with the native plants available at the upcoming BSWCD plant sale. Sure, I wrote, but I would like to add to that “beneficials,” those insects and arachnids that kill the troublesome bugs and thus, arguably, improve the health of the entire ecosystem.

I did my homework, cross referencing butterfly and beneficial lists with the Native Plant Sale list. Hands down, *Achillea* was the winner. Yarrow, as it is commonly known, is loved by hoverflies, ladybugs, mini wasps and other “good” predators, while also providing pollen to butterflies (and they love the easy landing pad).

I designed backwards, if you will, first researching the plants then deciding on the perfect space for them. What I came up with was a low, sunny border planting, 30’ wide by 5’ deep, that can go alongside your vegetable garden or be a low planting in front of taller shrubs. Curved, it can be a gracious edge to a lawn. Stretched out, it can replace the grass in your “hell strip” as it is sometimes called, that no-man’s land between your sidewalk and curb. Any which way, it will need plenty of sun and little water once established.

Grasses are included here because “clump-forming grasses provide excellent summer shelter and overwintering sites for ...beneficials.”¹ As one amazing study showed, “more than 1,500 [beneficial predators] were found in one square yard of grass-covered ‘beetle banks.’”²

You’ll notice the rocks and mud-hole on the plan. I suggest that, for your butterfly garden, you find some rocks and put them where they will be in the sun for a good part of the day. You might just find that this becomes a favorite “wing-drying” spot.

The mud-hole, on the other hand, is just an experiment. Last spring, I tried to maintain one and no butterflies ever showed up. However, all my readings say that butterflies just love to play in the mud. Actually, they are not playing; they are sucking needed nutrients from the muck. So, you might want to read up on what exactly they are sucking, and when they need it, and provide the perfect “fast food” for them. Once you have success, you have my permission to laugh at my feeble efforts.

This plan will look good year-round. The strong-foliage plants (milkweed, aster) will compliment those with airier foliage, such as the grasses and yarrow. There are some evergreens for winter interest (huckleberry and strawberry). What might concern me is that there may not be any flowers in the spring. In that case, you may want to add poppies, another all-star on the beneficial lists (but not available at the plant sale).

¹ “Beneficial Borders” by Cheryl Long. Organic Gardening Magazine (www.organicgardening.com), accessed 11/21/08.

² *ibid.*

If I had a large space and the right conditions, I would also plant elderberries (both blue and red), willows (an excellent early pollen source just as the beneficials are emerging), serviceberry, and snowberry.

If I had a ton of land, I would also plant cottonwood, cascara, ash and white oak. The butterflies love the pollen these trees put out (you and the butterflies may disagree on this point).

[The Lazy Alternative: Let it be! High on many of the butterfly and beneficials lists are plants that grow around here pretty much without even trying: dandelions, clover, Queen Anne's lace and anything in the mint family! (Please note that Queen Anne's lace, (*Daucus carota*) is on the Oregon and Washington noxious weeds lists because of its damage to grass seed and Christmas tree production, among other things.)]

As drawn, the plan is 5' x 30.' At least 5 hours of sun per day will be enough. Enjoy! ~Beth

Plant Shopping List

- 6 Roemer's Fescue, *Festuca roemeri*
- 5 Evergreen Huckleberry, *Vaccinium ovatum*
- 17 Yarrow, *Achillea millefolium*
- 7 Douglas Aster, *Aster subspicatus*
- 4 Milkweed, *Asclepias speciosa*
- 3 Tufted Hair Grass (Kalapuya), *Descampsia caespitosa*
- Interplant with Wood Strawberry, *Fragaria vesca*