

# Bringing butterflies back



Having butterflies flitting about your garden can be a wonderful sight, and they also play important roles in the local ecosystem. But remember that butterflies start their lives as caterpillars, so avoid chemical controls and tolerate some leaf loss on their host plants.

## Butterflies of South Australia

South Australia is home to a unique array of butterflies. It is believed that prior to European settlement 54 permanent species inhabited South Australia.

Since then a total of 78 butterflies have been recorded in South Australia, of which only one is endemic – the Lithochroa Blue (*Jalmenus lithochroa*).

## Threats

Habitat clearance and urban development has resulted in the loss of specialised environments impacting the floral diversity required to sustain, and then complete, a butterfly's lifecycle.

Consequently many Lepidopterans are either rare or threatened.

Some of the reasons for decline include:

- clearance of native vegetation
- drainage of swamps
- overgrazing, mowing and trampling of grasslands
- inappropriate fire regimes
- urbanisation
- use of pesticides (in particular aerial spraying).

Most butterflies are unable to adapt to altered conditions and the loss of a particular plant from an area can be directly responsible for the loss of a species dependent on that plant.

For example, the coastal Bitterbush Blue butterfly relies on the Coast bitter-bush (*Adriana klotzschii*) for habitat.

The disappearance of this plant from coastal areas has impacted upon the population of this now endangered species.

## Chemical use

Chemical use should be minimised. Pesticides, which are lethal to all insects, should be eliminated if you want a butterfly friendly garden. Remember you need caterpillars to get butterflies!



The Dainty Swallowtail (*Papilio anactus*) can be found in Adelaide. This butterfly relies on native plants such as the rare South Australian species, Desert Lime (*Citrus glauca*).  
Photo by Dragos Moise

## Habitat requirements

Specific native plants (i.e. host plants) play a key role throughout the various stages of a butterfly's lifecycle – and these plants can easily be incorporated into your garden.

The female butterfly is usually very selective in the plant she chooses to lay her eggs on and this will be different for each species. Host plants will provide the food requirements for the larvae (caterpillars) that hatch from the eggs. Main plant foods include sedges, native grasses and mistletoe.

Butterflies are fussy eaters and some species will rely on only one or two nectar plants for survival.

Include a variety of local native nectar producing plants to ensure there is food available in your garden throughout the year (e.g. local wattles (*Acacia* species), Tall Scurf-pea (*Cullen australasicum*), goodenias (*Goodenia* species), fanflowers (*Scaevola* species). Butterflies have an acute sense of smell and will travel vast distances to reach the desired nectar plant.

Species are also quite habitat specific with some only found in wetland or coastal areas, dry mallee woodlands or the moist woodland habitats of the Mount Lofty Ranges.

Even though the same plants may occur on the Adelaide Plains, some species prefer to cooler climates of the Hills and will not breed elsewhere.



## Water

An area of bare ground, ideally in a wet part of the garden, will ensure a ready supply of water for local butterflies.

## Important butterfly facts

Not only is it important to include the correct local native vegetation in a butterfly garden, but thought must also be given to where you put it.

Position the key plant foods where they will receive sun from mid-morning to mid-afternoon, which is the peak feeding time for adults. Butterflies are rarely seen feeding in the shade.

Butterflies are unable to create their own body heat and rely on warmth from the sun to raise their body temperature and wings for flight.

Butterflies also require sun for orientation. Flat stones in a sunny and well protected place provide warmth and resting spots.

Shelter is an important element of any butterfly garden. The butterflies require shelter from predators while feeding and laying eggs.

Protection from the elements is also essential as the delicate wings of butterflies can be easily ripped by strong winds.

Plant groups of the same species together so that it is more obvious to butterflies (e.g. clumps of native everlastings, bluebells make a striking wildflower show).

Locate tall plants to offer maximum protection from strong winds.

Butterflies are most active between mid- and late summer.

Grow a variety of natives in your garden so that a reliable food source is available throughout the year.

Spraying chemicals, mowing or slashing can destroy the native grasses and sedges on which butterfly and moth larvae are dependant.

## Top 5 tips

1. Use plants native to your suburb.
2. Plant species that are a range of heights.
3. Use mix of local native plants that flower throughout the year.
4. Manage your pets responsibly.
5. Minimise chemical use.

Please consider applying some of these principles to your own backyard, so that together we can help grow a great living environment for Adelaide.



A typical example of a home butterfly garden with native grasses and flowers

Photo by Jan Forrest

## More information

Butterfly Conservation South Australia  
<http://butterflyconservationsa.net.au>

Adelaide's butterfly-friendly species  
<http://butterflyconservationsa.net.au/butterflies/attraction/find-plants/>

Visit the urban biodiversity page of our website to access more Backyards 4 Wildlife information and contact details for specialist native plant nurseries.

[www.naturalresources.sa.gov.au/adelaidemtloftyranges](http://www.naturalresources.sa.gov.au/adelaidemtloftyranges)

Or contact your nearest Natural Resources Centre

**Black Hill**  
 115 Maryvale Road, Athelstone, SA 5076  
 P (08) 8336 0901

**Eastwood**  
 205 Greenhill Road, Eastwood, SA 5063  
 P (08) 8273 9100

**Gawler**  
 8 Adelaide Road, Gawler South, SA 5118  
 P (08) 8523 7700

**Willunga**  
 5 Aldinga Road, Willunga, SA 5172  
 P (08) 8550 3400

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