

My Yard – August

Hummingbirds and Butterflies

Nebraska Statewide Arboretum, plantnebraska.org

Hummingbirds and butterflies are some of our favorite and most dramatic migrators, at least among those that visit our home landscapes. While butterflies already have been active for several months, late summer is their peak season.

Fall migration is when we're most likely to see hummingbirds regularly in our gardens. They pass through briefly on spring migration, and can remain all summer if you're along waterways or other favored spots, but in fall they are in larger numbers and can stay and feed from August into October.

Hummingbirds

- There's nothing common about a hummingbird. They are the smallest bird, produce the smallest eggs and make the smallest nest. Their colors include metallic greens, blues and reds. They have the highest metabolism of any animal, with a heartbeat of well over 600 beats per minute; and they are the only group of birds that can deliberately fly backwards.
- Nebraska is on the migration route for four hummingbirds but the ruby-throated hummingbird is the one most commonly seen.
- Their diet consists of flower nectar, sap from trees, spiders and insects, usually captured in or near flowers. It's been estimated that not one square meter, or 40" plot of land, goes unvisited by them in any given year. Still, they may go unnoticed until hummingbird feeders are placed to draw them more readily into focus.
- If you've never had the privilege of watching hummingbirds closely or regularly, it is well worth the time and effort to put some feeders out with a solution of 4 parts water to 1 part sugar, with NO dye, boiled and then cooled and changed frequently in hot weather to avoid molds and bacteria.
- As a rule, native plants contain far more nectar than cultivated hybrids. Spring-blooming plants for early migration in April or May include: azalea, bottlebrush buckeye, columbine, coral bells, coralberry, crabapple, currant, flowering quince, hawthorn, honeysuckle, penstemon, tuliptree and weigela.
- For fall migration that can run almost until frost: blazing star, agastache, butterfly bush, daylily, four o'clocks, gayfeather, hibiscus, hollyhock, honeysuckle, hosta, lamb's ears, milkweed, monarda, penstemon, phlox and salvia.



Butterflies

- Some of the best nectar sources are plants we grow without trying: milkweeds are essential to monarch caterpillars and the plant is bad-tasting and poisonous to prey—which quickly learn to avoid eating the larvae; thistles are also favored by monarchs; swallowtail caterpillars feed on dill, parsley, Queen Anne's lace, carrot, celery and fennel; and dandelions attract gossamer wings, vanessids and skippers.
- Hybridized flowers tend to be selected for characteristics other than nectar supply and therefore tend to produce less nectar. And single flowers are more open and accessible to butterflies than doubles and offer a “landing platform.”
- Creating “puddling” areas with mud allows butterflies to withdraw minerals from the wet soil.
- They like to be in full sun but prefer sites sheltered from wind by grasses, vines or shrubs.



CUTLINE: Top photo of hummingbird at feeder is courtesy of Photography by Keller.