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How to Grow a Butterfly Bush



Attract beautiful butterflies to your garden with a butterfly bush.

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Planting, Growing, and Pruning Butterfly Bushes

By [Catherine Boeckmann](#)
Last Updated: May 8, 2024



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The **butterfly bush** (*Buddleia davidii*) is a fast-growing shrub with masses of showy, fragrant flowers that attract pollinators. Planted in spring or fall before frost, this perennial will bloom from summer through autumn. Learn how to grow a butterfly bush (and learn if you should plant a butterfly bush).

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About Butterfly Bushes

Also called “summer lilacs,” Buddleja are hardy to Zone 5 and remain evergreen from Zone 8 south. Growing 5 to 10 feet tall, this large, arching shrub produces an abundance of flowers—long, spiked trusses—in mainly purple and pink colors. The shrub grows well in perennial gardens or as a shrub border, and the flowers are good for cutting.

Don't prune at the wrong time. Butterfly bush growth appears on new wood, so pruning should wait until the new wood is ready to grow in spring. Also, be patient with this shrub as it may not leaf out in the spring until



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Invasive Concerns of Butterfly Bushes

Please note that the butterfly bush, originally imported from China, has been classified as an **invasive species** in many U.S. states as it's known to crowd out native plants that are essential to wildlife. In warm climates, it can become a noxious weed and spread aggressively,

Note: The butterfly bush does provide adult butterflies with nectar similar to that of many flowers. However, it is not a “host plant” for butterfly larvae; if you want the butterflies to stay, be sure to add native host plants such as milkweed, aster, and dill. [See plants that attract butterflies](#).

If you would still like to put a butterfly bush in your garden, there are a few species of non-invasive butterfly bushes native to the southwestern United States. Also, there are newer varieties that stay compact and won't take over your garden. See our native list of butterfly bushes below.

Please check with your local [cooperative extension](#) for more information.

Read Next

- [Common Plants You Probably Thought Were Natives](#)
- [Best Milkweed Varieties for Monarch Butterflies](#)
- [Flowers and Plants that Attract Butterflies](#)

PLANTING

Choose a location with full sun and moist,

“ . . . ”

When to Plant

- Plant shrubs in spring or fall before frost.

[See your local frost dates.](#)

How to Plant

- Loosen the soil from 12 to 15 inches deep and mix in a 2- to 4-inch layer of compost.
- Dig a hole twice the diameter of the plant container.
- When placing the plant in the hole, the top of the rootball should be level with the soil surface. Gently backfill the hole around the rootball. Firm the soil.
- Water thoroughly.

GROWING

Caring for Butterfly Bushes

- Water freely when in growth and sparingly otherwise. In the summer, water if rainfall is less than 1 inch per week.
- Avoid fertilizing butterfly bush; too much fertility promotes leaf growth over flower production.
- Remove spent flower spikes to encourage new shoots and flower buds. In addition, it is important to deadhead the flowers just as they start to wither so that this in-

seeds. Deadheading of this invasive is now required in many states.

- Each spring, apply a thin layer of compost, then 2 to 4 inches of mulch to retain moisture and control weeds.
- In cold, Northern climates, spread mulch up to 6 inches deep around the trunk to nurture it through the winter.
- Buddleias are very late to break dormancy, so don't be in a hurry to assess winter damage.
- The bush should bloom abundantly even in its first year. In warmer climates, the bushes will grow into trees and develop rugged trunks that peel; peeling is normal.
- In the northern limit of their range, they behave as herbaceous perennials, dying back to the root in cold winters.

Pruning Butterfly Bushes

Butterfly bushes must be pruned vigorously, or their flowers will grow up so high that you can't see and enjoy them!

- Since butterfly bushes bloom on new wood, even if there is no die-back, cut them back to the ground early each spring. Yes, hack to the ground!
- Also, prune out dead stems, cutting them

- Even where winters are mild enough for the stems to survive, prune severely to stimulate abundant growth on which flowers are borne.

Types

We are no longer recommending new plantings of the butterfly bush, given its categorization as an invasive in most of North America. Instead, we recommend using plants that better support the native landscape and food web, given our declining pollinator population. [See alternative plants that attract butterflies.](#)

Native Alternatives to Butterfly Bushes

Here are a few great flowering alternatives that also serve as host plants for caterpillars:

- [Asters](#) (*Symphyotrichum*)
- Beardtongue (*Penstemon*)
- [Bee Balm](#) (*Monarda*)
- [Black-Eyed Susan](#) (*Rudbeckia*)
- [Columbine](#) (*Aquilegia*)
- [Coneflowers](#) (*Echinacea*)
- Goldenrod (*Solidago*)
- Irises (*Iris*)

- Spicebush (*Lindera*)
- Strawberries (*Fragaria*)
- Verbena (*Verbena*)
- Viburnum (*Viburnum*)
- Yarrow (*Achillea*)

See a list of host plants native to your area

here: [Native Plant Finder](#)

GARDENING PRODUCTS



PESTS/DISEASES

- Susceptible to capsid bugs, caterpillars, weevils, mullein moths, and spider mites.
- Fungal leaf spots and die-backs can occur.
- Butterfly bushes are one of many deer-resistant plants.

SHRUBS AND TREES**ABOUT THE AUTHOR****Catherine Boeckmann**

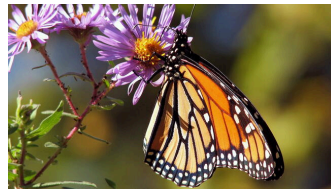
Catherine Boeckmann loves nature, stargazing, and gardening so it's not surprising that she and The Old Farmer's Almanac found each other. She leads digital content for the Almanac website, and is also a certified master gardener in the state of Indiana. [Read More from Catherine Boeckmann](#)

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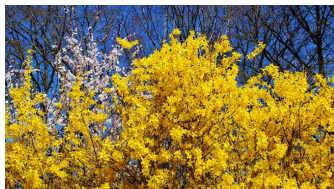
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COMMENTS

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Sandra (not verified) 1 year ago

I have three different varieties of butterfly bush and
all are thriving. I live out west where the plants are

learned from a nursery person to give them an overhead spray of water during the dusty summer months. If let go, the plants' stomas (pores) become clogged, the plant lets out a distress call alerting neighboring plants and hungry insects. Since I've followed the nursery person's advice I've had no problems. I've found the plant lives up to its name by attracting a variety of butterflies (and bees).

REPLY

Anne (not verified) 1 year ago

FA wrote: The butterfly bush does provide adult butterflies with nectar similar to that of many flowers. However, it is not a "host plant" for butterfly larvae; if you want the butterflies to stay, be sure to add native host plants such as milkweed, aster, and dill.

REPLY

Mary Colwell (not verified) 1 year ago

Hi Catherine, thank so much for your information about how this species is invasive. I'm glad you encourage people to go with native plants. Please keep this up!

[REPLY](#)

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[REPLY](#)

Aur lie Lang (not verified) 1 year ago

I am glad you point out the deficiency of the butterfly bush and give alternative but I wish you had done the article on this alone instead of putting the bush on the spotlight. It is not a native plant, does nothing for butterflies except provide a quick snack and distract them from pollinating the native pollinators.

I am grateful for the list of alternatives.

[REPLY](#)

Deb Crosby (not verified) 1 year 9 months ago

I live on Vancouver Island where things tend to grow extremely well. I love the looks of butterfly

right up there along with yellow flag irises, giant hogweed, knotweed and daphne. These invasive species are taking over so that native plants are dying out and consequently wildlife is losing food sources and habitat. I'm sure butterfly bush is native somewhere but it's a bad idea for this area! I've already spent hours trying to dig out the matted mass of yellow iris rhizomes from a small pond in my garden. I don't know if I'll ever get them out. They are so pretty when they bloom but who knew? The Canadian government has invasive species resources for identification and offers alternatives for planting. I'd encourage all of us to do our homework before we bring home that "vigorous" plant from the nursery!

REPLY

Abbey (not verified) 1 year 9 months ago

Hi! My Mother in law gave me a butterfly bush that was transplanted from her yard down our road. It's huge, and happy, but has never had flowers. I trim it every spring. Any advice would be appreciated!

REPLY

— — —

spot where it gets a lot of sun? That is important. Also, go easy on the fertilizer. Sometimes too much fertilizer can encourage leaf growth but stunt blooms. If this season once again disappoints without blooms, we would suggest cutting it down to about four inches above the soil in early spring. Good luck!

REPLY

Rick (not verified) 2 years ago

Hi, Question: 2 out of 3 of my butterfly may possibly be dead, one of which is 5 feet from the other. I'm hoping they are going to start new growth. I don't cut or prune them. I'm not sure what to do, I've read to trim them (dead head) then one article said cut them to the ground. Does any one have any different ideas or let me know what I should do. Thank you.
Rick

REPLY

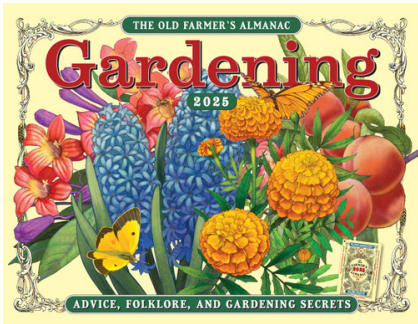
The Editors 1 year 12 months ago

Hi, Rick. The best thing to do is to severely cut the bush back. The sooner the

REPLY

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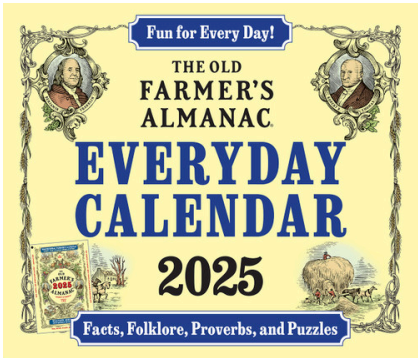
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