

SCHOOL BUTTERFLY GARDENS

by Linda Killen



Children work in the butterfly garden at Spessard Holland Elementary School.



Butterflies are attracted to the red and yellow flowers blooming in the butterfly garden at Surfside Elementary School.

Photos by Linda Killen

The children at Surfside Elementary School in Satellite Beach, Florida, have a living butterfly garden right outside their classroom windows.

Instead of reading about butterflies and the process of metamorphosis, they see them every day. They have observed the entire life cycle of the Gulf Fritillary butterfly from mating, to egg laying, to caterpillar, to emergence as an adult butterfly. It has been an experience that lets them see nature at first hand. They develop an awareness and sensitivity for nature and ecology.

They are also learning about the importance of native plants.

The butterfly garden includes both nectar and larval host plants, and native plants are the best choice. They are what the butterflies are most attracted to, and the plants do the best in Florida's environment with minimal care.

The children have learned to identify several species of butterflies and their host plants. They have seen the caterpillar, chrysalis, and adult of Gulf Fritillaries, Giant Swallowtails, White Peacocks, and Monarch butterflies. They also have seen the adult butterflies of Cloudless Sulfurs, Great Southern Whites, and Long-tailed Skippers.

In May of 1990, Surfside received a grant from the Talented and Gifted Program. The students that were chosen to participate cleared the garden area and did the planting. Parent volunteers purchased the plants from a native plant nursery, selecting plants that bloom at different times of the year to provide a constant nectar source. Butterflies were coming to the plants before they were even out of the pots! The favorite nectar plants in the butterfly garden appear to be lantana and blazing star (*Liatrix*).

The biggest success has been the passion vine plants and the Gulf Fritillary

butterflies. Passion vine spreads underground, providing a continuing supply of plants, and Gulf Fritillaries are in the garden on every sunny day. The caterpillars have eaten all the leaves of the passion vine and are now working on the stems and fruit. The caterpillars have climbed the walls of the school and formed their chrysalises there.

The students have been fascinated with the entire project, and delight in showing the butterflies, caterpillars, and chrysalises to anyone who will take the time to look. One of the students suggested that we put a sign up on the walk that says, "Caution - Caterpillar Crossing".

Three other elementary schools in Brevard County have installed butterfly gardens: Lockmar in Palm Bay and

Spessard Holland in Satellite Beach received assistance through the Gifted Student Program; and Ocean Breeze in Indian Harbour Beach were helped by the Talented Student Program.

Two other schools - Indialantic Elementary in Indialantic and Gemini Elementary in Melbourne Beach - are planning butterfly garden installations.

Bill and Linda Killen, Conradina Chapter, have been instrumental in getting these butterfly gardens on school grounds, providing slide presentations and helping with the planning and planting. Sharon Dolan of Maple Street Natives has been helpful in providing native plant species, and Teresa Knazik helped with the project at Lockmar Elementary School in Palm Bay.

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