



Butterflies and moths: who is who?

Certainly, the Monarch butterfly is easily recognizable, but sometimes it can be hard to tell the difference between butterflies and moths as they fly through the garden. Knowing some of their physical and behavior traits will help you be able to tell them apart.

Butterflies have long, thin antennae that are knobbed at the end, while those of moths are either long and thin or feathery. While moths are plump and fuzzy, butterflies have smooth, slender bodies. Another physical difference is when resting, butterflies rest with their wings held upright and moths spread them out. Butterflies and moths both belong to the Lepidoptera family of insects, but it's the butterflies who are the most brightly colored. They both get their color from loose powdery scales that cover their wings. In fact, Lepidoptera comes from the Greek for "scaly wings."

If this color is rubbed off, the wings become transparent and membranous, like those of a fly. This is very obvious in the clearwing butterfly, who naturally has few scales.

As far as behavioral differences, butterflies typically fly during the day and moths at night. When it comes to warming their bodies, butterflies rely on the sun and moths move their wings. This relates back to the time of day each is most active. For those who are seeing butterflies in the garden, on cool mornings you're likely to see them hanging out on branches or rocks, warming their bodies.

As far as finding a mate, butterflies rely on their sight. Moths depend on their scent, partly because of their less vibrant coloring, but also because moths are active at night. Another difference is butterflies feed on nectar, which is why you can plant certain flowers that attract butterflies. Moths rely on fat stored during the larval stage for survival.

And lastly, butterflies make a chrysalis that hangs from a branch or other structure, while moths make cocoons underground or on top of the ground.

Now is a great time of the year to see common species of butterflies and moths in the landscape, including American snout, eight spotted forester, phaon crescent and common checkered skipper.

There are a few things gardeners should keep in mind if they want to have butterflies and moths populate the landscape. First, select host plants where they can lay their eggs. Once the larvae hatch, the host plants will serve as food for the developing caterpillars. Choose nectar plants to provide a food source for butterflies. Butterflies also like sunny open spaces, shelter from the wind, as well as fresh water.

Plants such as milkweed, dill, violets and asters are great for caterpillars. Butterflies like ironweed, yellow coneflowers, goldenrod and brightly colored asters.

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