



is butterfly bush bad

3 Reasons to Never Plant Butterfly Bush Again

If you truly love nature and butterflies, you can't plant this invasive favorite anymore—no excuses.

By Leah Zerbe

If someone took 75 percent of your food away, you wouldn't be happy. But when you plant plants that provide nectar only, including invasive plants like butterfly bush, that's what you're doing to birds and butterflies in your own backyard.

A leading wildlife ecologist wants you to start thinking about your property—no matter how big or small—as an important link in your local ecosystem. It's no exaggeration to say that when you choose which plants to include in your garden, you're deciding if members of your community's local food web will be nourished or unintentionally starved.

And to get to that mind frame, which is a way of thinking that *truly* benefits nature, including its butterflies, you're going to have to come to a harsh realization: You need to stop planting the butterfly bush—forever.

We turned to Doug Tallamy, PhD, professor and chair of entomology and wildlife ecology at the University of Delaware, to give us the hard truth about butterfly bush. Tallamy also wrote the must-have book for every home, *Bringing Nature Home*. (It'll help you make much smarter planting decisions.)

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Butterfly Bush Problem #1: It doesn't stay in your yard. Butterfly is an invasive plant, meaning it outcompetes and crowds out beneficial native plants that have been naturally growing in your community for centuries. Native to Asia, in this

country, butterfly bush readily spreads and takes over space where native plants—the ones naturally selected to nourish the local food web (the birds, butterflies, and moths most people love to watch in their yards)—would normally thrive. In fact, *Buddleja davidii* has life history traits that make it invasive in most environments.

"I hear the 'it's invasive here, but not over there' argument a lot," says Tallamy. "While it is invasive in many parts of the U.S., what's really important is that the plant has the ability to be invasive almost anywhere. If it's not in some place, chances are good it will be. They become invasive when they reach a certain density, when lots of people plant it."

Butterfly bush clearly moves around. There's clear documentation of butterfly bush invasions on Superfund restoration sites that are supposed to be grasslands. In Hawaii, there are some islands that are virtually all butterfly bush.

"People who say it doesn't move around are in the denial stage," Tallamy says. "I wouldn't fight it as much as I do if it weren't invasive, but it just doesn't stay where we plant it."

And when you get right down to it, do your private properties rights to grow what you want trump those of the plants, animals, and even other people around you?

"I wish people would know that what they do on their property impacts other properties and natural areas. Do they have the right to do that? I would argue no, they don't," Tallamy says.

Live in the Pennsylvania area? See Tallamy May 17 at a pair of Hawk Mountain events!

Butterfly Bush Problem #2: It doesn't really benefit butterflies.

There's no denying that butterfly bush's long, narrow tufts of flowers are beautiful. And like many flowering plants, it *is* a good nectar plant. But when the only plant you plant for butterflies is butterfly bush, you're not going to have butterflies anymore, Tallamy warns.

 What butterflies are desperately in need of are proper host

plants so they can reproduce and their larval offspring can feed on host plant leaves. Instead of being sucked in by butterfly bush's beauty, start making the connection between plants, butterflies, and other members of the food web, and work more native host plants into your landscape, such as butterfly weed, other milkweeds, joe-pye weed, and oak trees.

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"People rationalize their perceived need for butterfly bush because they think it helps butterflies," Tallamy says. "What they really want is a pretty plant in their yard."

Butterfly Bush Problem #3: It's contributing to the collapse of food webs.

Here's the harsh truth: Planting nonnative plants in your yard is actually making it harder for the butterflies and birds in your neighborhood to survive.

Nonnative plants support less than a quarter of the species of insects native plants support. (And those insects drive food webs. Most birds need caterpillars, not berries, to feed their young.)

For instance, if you want chickadees to breed in your yard, you need plants that will produce to support the 6,000 to 9,000 caterpillars the birds need during the 16 days when they are feeding their young. "If you don't have that, the chickadees—the plant-caterpillar-chickadee food web—stops," Tallamy explains. "If you don't choose natives, right away you're removing at least 75 percent of the food that is supporting the biodiversity that's out there."

And critters need all the help they can get. A third of plants in North America aren't actually native to North America. And get this: 80 percent of plants in our yards aren't native. "The impact of all of these nonnative plants is creating novel ecosystems that are not supporting food webs, therefore not supporting biodiversity," Tallamy says. "We're seeing the entire collapse of food webs."

The solution in your own yard is simple. "You need plants that

make caterpillars," Tallamy says. It really all comes down to that. To make smarter plant choices, refer to *Bringing Nature Home* and to Lady Bird Johnson's Wildflower Database.