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On Gossamer Wings

The ancients believed butterflies were departed spirits of the dead. We know, at the very least, that they help to transport pollen.

Butterflies prefer flowers with bright colors, especially pink, light blues, yellow, and white. Red will also occasionally attract butterflies, as they are one of the few insects that are able to see red. Their favorite blossoms have delicate, sweet scents, and are often round with flared petals leading to a narrow throat that conceals nectar. An inflorescence composed of many such flowers provides both landing pad and abundant resources. Plants in the phlox, verbena, and milkweed families are good choices for the butterfly garden.

After landing on the wide petals, butterflies delicately probe the nectaries with their long tongues (proboscises). Less efficient pollinators than bees, butterflies retain only minute amounts of pollen on their tall, thin legs or tongues. Tropical zebra wings (heliconids) actively collect cucurbit pollen on their tongues and steep it in nectar. This “butterfly smoothie” extracts amino acid nutrients from the pollen.

