

## **If You Plant Zinnias, Butterflies Will Come!**

Grown any zinnias lately? If so, you're in good company. These cheerful annuals are growing in popularity as more and more colorful, compact, and disease-resistant varieties appear on seed racks. Native to Mexico and Central America, Zinnias can now be found in summer gardens throughout the world.

Of course, zinnias have featured strongly in American gardens for many decades. They are quick to germinate and easy to grow. Zinnias excel as cut flowers; their rigid stems hold long-lasting blossoms that don't drop petals. And they are a natural for the butterfly garden, attracting many species throughout their long blooming season.

Some zinnias are more attractive to butterflies than others. You might think that the single-flowered zinnias would be the uncontested favorites. And you would be wrong. *Z. 'Profusion Orange'* and *'Profusion Cherry'*. In spite of their single flowers, they did not attract many butterflies. But the similar Pinwheel series particularly the doubled variety, attracted a lot of species well into October.

In eastern Washington, where summers are hot and dry, the favorite is the large double *'Cut and Come Again'* variety. With its sturdy landing platform, the latter is a major attraction for Western Tiger Swallowtails, who linger to sip nectar. *'Cut and Come Again'* blooms from midsummer to frost, in hot shades of pink, yellow, orange, and scarlet. Great for bouquets.

Blue Point Formula Mix and *'Royal Purple'* big purple flowers, in particular, are a magnet for fritillaries, American Painted Ladies, and Eastern Tiger Swallowtails. Moderately attractive zinnias include giant cactus-flowered *'Sunbow Mix'* and *Z. angustifolia 'Crystal White'* (Park Seed's name for *'Star White'*).

The Star series of *Z. angustifolia*, particularly *'Star White'* proved to be the best, attracting blues, sulphurs, hairstreaks, skippers, Red Admirals, Painted Ladies, and others. In containers, it makes a beautiful display, cascading over the edge of a planter. *'Star Gold'* also attracted butterflies, but there was little activity on *'Star Orange'*.

### **How to Grow Zinnias**

Butterflies are most drawn to taller Zinnia varieties with a clear yellow center, which is the source of nectar that feeds pollinators like butterflies and bees. Some of the double varieties (although spectacular) hide this disk, it's harder for butterflies to find the food quickly.

The purpose of any plant is to reproduce itself. Zinnias do this by creating flowers that draw pollinators to help create the seeds. Once enough seeds are mature (dried flower heads), the plant stops making flowers. So cutting zinnias for bouquets actually helps you have more flowers!

Here are my top ten tips:

1. *Plant in the Right Spot*—at least six hours of sun per day.
2. *Plant Outside after the Last Frost*—May 15 for Kentucky.
3. *Thin plants*—Cut off at the ground to have plants about 6-12 inches apart. Plants that are too close can develop diseases like Powdery Mildew.
4. *Mulch and Fertilize*—Once plants are established, spread about 2 inches of mulch to keep the soil from drying out. Every few weeks, spread a small amount of flower fertilizer.
5. *Prune When Young*—When the young zinnia plant is 4-5 inches tall, use shears to cut off the top. This early pruning encourages multiple stems for more flowers.
6. *Water in the Morning*—Zinnias don't like to be wet, and being damp encourages diseases, so watering in the morning gives them all day to dry out.
7. *Cut Lots of Bouquets*—the more flowers you cut, the more flowers you'll have.
8. *Deadhead Spent Flowers*—if the flowers are left to make seeds, the plant will stop creating flowers. The purpose of flowers is to reproduce itself, so seeds=done.
9. *Collect Dried Flowers*—these are your seeds for next year.
10. *Have Your Camera Ready!* Photos are also a great way to track the different butterfly species visiting your Zinnias. Also, take note of which varieties attract more butterflies than others, and add more of those to your planting next season!

**Have you been snapping photos of butterflies on your Zinnia?**

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