

The Texas Butterfly Garden at the National Butterfly Center

by Norman Winter and Jeffrey Glassberg

Now that the stunning Visitors Pavilion is a reality, we are excited to complete the initial phase of the National Butterfly Center's master plan, by creating extensive formal gardens adjacent to the Visitors Pavilion.

In preparation for creating the Texas Butterfly Garden, NABA formed a committee, chaired by Dr. Frederick Steiner, Dean of the School of Architecture, University of Texas at Austin, and including Wendy Evans Joseph (architect of the Visitors Pavilion), Larry Sheerin (president of Starr Produce and an avid butterfly gardener), Norman Winter (Executive Director of the National Butterfly Center) and Jeffrey Glassberg (President of NABA). The Committee identified the twenty-one top landscape architect firms in the United States, and invited these firms, based in Boston, New York, Chicago, Dallas, San Francisco, and elsewhere, to submit proposals.

We were very pleased that sixteen of these firms submitted proposals! After carefully examining the sixteen submissions, the Committee chose three finalists who were invited to come to the Lower Rio Grande Valley, in May 2011, to explain their visions for the gardens.

All three finalists were outstanding (in fact, one of the finalists was, after our interview, featured in a full page article in the Wall Street Journal; while another finalist was featured in a different article in the New York Times!) and the Committee chose Studio Outside of Dallas, Texas to lead this project.

Studio Outside and its personnel have recently created vibrant landscapes at

A Tour of the Texas Butterfly Garden

Visitors exit the east side of the Visitors Pavilion (V) and walk under an arbor (A) that shades a main north-south walkway with butterfly friendly vines. Crossing east of the arbor one experiences the Welcome Gardens (W), sloping slightly upward and intensively planted with colorful butterfly plants. These gardens will have large numbers of butterflies throughout the year. Just east of the Welcome Gardens is the Great Lawn (GL). This ample space, along with the covered Event Center (E) just north of it, will be used for special events. South of the Great Lawn are the Sunken Gardens (S), an area containing several different gardens. On the east side of the Sunken Gardens, a planted terrace (T) will contain steps leading the visitor toward the large Hackberry Grove (H) (not really shown in this diagram) to the east. Before reaching the Hackberry Grove, visitors will encounter a caterpillar hoop structure (C), a portion of which will provide children's educational material and a portion of which will be a screened area where local butterflies, caterpillars and chrysalids can be seen up close and on days that are cloudy. At the southwestern edge of the Sunken Gardens will be a Butterfly Pyramid (P), planted with butterfly attracting plants and with a walking pathway to the top.

Back on the main pathway, walking southward, five large gardens will be devoted to particular species of butterflies, planted with many of their native foodplants, their adult nectar sources, and plants that provide needed structure. The gardens will be for Monarchs (M), Gulf Fritillary (F), Crimson Patch (CP), crescents (CR) and leafwings (L). We believe that these are the first large scale gardens in the world designed for specific species of butterflies.



Thomas Schaller



Studio Outside

Top: An artist's view of the proposed Texas Butterfly Garden, looking northward from the air over the existing Education and Research Garden.

Bottom: Schematic plan for the Texas Butterfly Garden. Note that the arrangement of the pyramid and the species gardens has been slightly changed in the newer, top version.



An artist's view of a portion of the proposed Texas Butterfly Garden, looking southward from the Great Lawn, showing the Sunken Gardens, the Terraced Garden and the Butterfly Pyramid.

Longwood Gardens in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania; at Shangri La Botanical Garden in Orange, Texas; at the Atlanta Botanical Garden; and at the United States Botanic Garden in Washington, DC and at many other projects.

The Committee worked closely with Studio Outside, especially with two of the principals of the firm, Tary Arterburn and Tres Fromme, to design and develop construction plans that met the exceptionally detailed needs of a large-scale butterfly garden using native plants in South Texas. We believe that the Texas Butterfly Garden designed by Studio Outside, using only plant species native to southern Texas and northern Mexico, will be the largest and most sophisticated butterfly garden in the world.

In addition to the main four seasons sunken gardens within the larger garden, there eventually will be more than forty gardens, each devoted to a single butterfly species (or group of species). These will be the first

gardens in the world designed in this way. Because each of the more than 200 species of butterflies found at the National Butterfly Center requires its own palette of native plants, the Texas Butterfly Garden will be the largest botanical garden in the world that uses native plants organized in formal beds. We currently project using more than 250 species of native plants.

We are working with many South Texas ranch owners who are allowing the National Butterfly Center personnel to survey their lands for the plant species needed for the new gardens so that we may obtain seeds, or, in cases where there are large stands of the plant, some plants themselves.

Some of the first species-specific gardens will be for Monarchs (and Queens and Soldiers), Gulf Fritillaries and Crimson Patches. For the Monarch garden, we will try to include all fourteen of the milkweed family plants that are native to the Lower Rio Grande Valley and northern Mexico (although

some are extremely rare and we may be unable to locate any source material) along with four species of native nectar plants that Monarchs, Queens and Soldiers are attracted to. All of these will be arranged as formal, very attractive, beds. [And, by the way, we're trying to limit the width of the beds to about four feet, so that photo obsessed butterfly enthusiasts don't have to trample the precious plants while trying to photograph a rare butterfly in the middle of the bed!]. Creation of the Monarch Garden is being done in cooperation with the National Parks Service.

The Gulf Fritillary Garden will include the three native species of passionflowers, along with seven species of native nectar plants.

The Mexican Bluewing Garden (not shown in the illustrations) will feature Vasey's Wild-Lime, Mexican Bluewings' only caterpillar foodplant. These upright, bright green, small trees will form a small, formal copse. Mexican Bluewings do not normally visit flowers for nectar. Instead, they are naturally attracted to sap and rotting fruit. Therefore, instead of nectar plants, the Mexican Bluewing Garden will have an area where we will place Banana Brew, our own irresistible concoction.

The National Butterfly Center is already a fantastic place for butterflies and for the people who want to see and learn about them — 210 species have already been seen here! When the new gardens are completed, the beauty of the gardens will be a match for the beauty of the butterflies.

To create a world-class Butterfly/Botanical Garden is very expensive, and, of course, the cost of ongoing operations is significant. If you care about butterflies and their future, we hope that you will consider donating what you able, to help make these new gardens a reality. Visit the National Butterfly Center soon, to see for yourself how sensational it already is and how it's future is even more spectacular.



The native plants that will grace the garden beds in the Texas Butterfly Garden are not only critical for creating habitat for butterflies, many of them are also beautiful in their own right. We hope to introduce many of them into horticultural use over the next few years.

Top: We don't yet know if Monarchs, Queens or Soldiers use Netted Milkvines, but they're so beautiful that we're going to try! May 7, 2003. Travis Co., TX.

Bottom: Fetid Passionflowers will be in the Gulf Fritillary Garden. May 23, 2009. National Butterfly Center, Hidalgo Co., TX.