

Pet-Safe Butterfly Garden Checklist

Butterflies need host plants, not just nectar — and a few of the best host plants are ones you do not want a dog eating. This checklist keeps the host-plant strategy intact and places it safely.

1. Pet-safe setup

Milkweed is the only host plant monarch caterpillars will use. It contains cardiac glycosides and is listed as toxic to dogs, cats, and horses. Arizona pipevine is in the same category.

- ☐ Decision made on milkweed: plant it inside a fenced bed, raised planter, or side yard the dog cannot enter — or leave it out and support the other Valley butterflies.
- ☐ Native species chosen (Arizona, pineleaf, or rush milkweed) instead of tropical milkweed, which can stay evergreen here and is linked to parasite buildup and disrupted migration.
- ☐ Gloves worn when pruning milkweed; sap irritates skin and eyes.
- ☐ Host-plant nursery grouped in one bordered bed inboard of the fence line the dog patrols.
- ☐ Bed edged with low steel, boulders, or a short picket frame so traffic stays out without walling off the view.
- ☐ Nursery kept away from the water bowl, feeding station, and the shaded spot the dog actually naps in.
- ☐ Cocoa mulch removed; shredded bark or wood chips used instead.
- ☐ Vet number and a pet poison hotline number posted.

2. Host plants, nectar, and puddling

- ☐ Nectar planted in drifts of three or more, with flat, broad landing surfaces — butterflies feed perched.
- ☐ Puddling station built: shallow saucer of damp sand with a pinch of soil, kept moist rather than flooded, in morning sun.
- ☐ Any open water basin dumped and refilled every 1–2 days.
- ☐ Caterpillar damage accepted as the goal, not a problem to spray.

Butterfly	Host plant
Queen and monarch	Milkweeds — fence in a pet yard.
Pipevine swallowtail	Arizona pipevine — also toxic to pets; treat it like milkweed.
Giant swallowtail	Citrus. The 'orange dog' caterpillar looks like bird droppings — worth tolerating on a mature tree.
Sulphurs	Cassia and senna shrubs, plus desert senna.
Painted lady	Globe mallow, hollyhock, desert marigold.
Checkered skippers	Desert mallow family plants.

Damp sand supplies the minerals butterflies need without holding the standing water mosquitoes require.

3. Seasonal tips

Season	Routine
Spring (Mar–May)	Penstemon, desert marigold, globe mallow, and brittlebush carry nectar. Check host plants for eggs before any pruning.

Summer (Jun–Sep)	Mexican honeysuckle, salvias, zinnia, verbena, and milkweed bloom. Refresh the puddling station every couple of days as it dries fast.
Fall (Oct–Nov)	Mexican bush sage, aster, and late zinnia. Best planting window of the year — add host plants now so they are established by spring.
Winter (Dec–Feb)	Chuparosa and aloe hold the gap for the few adults still flying. Leave stems standing; chrysalides overwinter on them.

Seasonal timing is written for the Phoenix low desert. Higher-elevation Arizona yards run several weeks later in spring and earlier in fall.

4. Pest control rules

- [] No broad-spectrum insecticides anywhere in the yard.
- [] No Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*) on foliage — it kills butterfly larvae indiscriminately. Bti in standing water for mosquito larvae is a different application.
- [] No systemic neonicotinoid products on anything a pollinator visits; they move into nectar and pollen.
- [] Aphids handled with a hose blast, or left for lady beetles and lacewings.
- [] No sticky traps or tanglefoot in planting beds.

Before you plant. No plant list is a guarantee. Animals vary and quantity matters — confirm every species against the ASPCA toxic and non-toxic plant database before you buy, and call your veterinarian or a pet poison hotline if you think your animal ate something.

Full guide: aeoutdoorliving.com/gardening/guides/pet-safe-butterfly-garden-arizona · Beneficial insects: aeoutdoorliving.com/gardening/guides/beneficial-insects-arizona

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