

# Attract Pollinators with Joe-Pye Weed, Butterfly Weed

By Silvia Liu, Fairfax Master Gardener Intern

Last year, two of my boxwoods died and left an open area in front of my house. Instead of replacing them, I decided to plant a native pollinator patch in the vacant space. In early spring, I planted, among other native plants, Hollow Joe-Pye weed (*Eutrochium fistulosum*), also known as trumpetweed. I chose Joe-Pye weed because I had a chat with a plant expert at a local nursery, who told me that Joe-Pye weed is a butterfly magnet and it is easy to grow.

## Joe-Pye Weed

Joe-Pye weed (*Eutrochium Raf.*) is said to be named after Joe-Pye, a Native American medicine man who used the plant to treat various illnesses. A plant fact sheet from the United States Department of Agriculture claims that Native Americans used Hollow Joe-Pye weed to treat fevers, colds, chills, diarrhea, rheumatism and other ailments. While the plant's medicinal values have not been scientifically proven, its status as a butterfly magnet is well-known. I was convinced of its ability to attract pollinators after the plant expert at the local nursery showed me a video he took of Monarch butterflies and bumblebees swarming Joe-Pye weed blossoms.

Joe-Pye weed does not have well-organized petals that other native pollinator favorites, such as Black-Eyed Susan or Orange Coneflower, have. Instead, it has airy inflorescences, which are loose clusters of small flowers on top of stems. These flower clusters are mildly fragrant and come in different colors, including purple, pink and white, depending on the species. Joe-Pye weed blooms between late summer (August) until fall (October), and it is invaluable to butterflies and other pollinators in search of nectar during late season.



Hollow Joe-Pye Weed

North Carolina Cooperative Extension

## Joe-Pye Weed Species

Joe-Pye weed is the common name for several species of perennial wildflowers in the aster (*Asteraceae/Compositae*) plant family. These species include: (1) Spotted Joe-Pye weed (*Eutrochium maculatum*), (2) Sweet-Scented Joe-Pye weed (*Eutrochium purpureum*), (3) Coastal Plain Joe-Pye weed (*Eutrochium dubium*), (4) Steele's eupatorium (*Eutrochium steelei*), and (5) Hollow Joe-Pye weed (*Eutrochium fistulosum*), which is what I have planted in the native pollinator patch in front of my house. The United States Department of Agriculture classifies these five species as native to Virginia and a number of other states.

## Joe-Pye Weed Growth Habits

Joe-Pye weed is cold hardy and grows well in Plant Hardiness Zones 4 to 8. It usually does very well in a Northern Virginia home garden (Zone 7a), because it is native to the region and grows naturally in a variety of habitats, including woodlands, meadows, and near watery landscapes. Joe-Pye weed likes moist to wet, well-drained and humus-rich soil. During the hottest and driest summer days, when soil becomes dry, it will

need additional watering to prevent wilting. It is a sun-loving plant that grows well in full sun conditions (6 and more hours of sun a day), but it can tolerate being in part shade areas (2 to 6 hours of sun a day).

This native plant does not have any known serious insect or disease problems and has good resistance to powdery mildew. Certain insects, such as grasshoppers, flea beetles and saw flies, however, do like to devour its leaves. These insects might cause leaf damage, but such damage is cosmetic in nature and rarely affects plant vigor.

Joe-Pye weed is a fast-growing plant that requires plenty of room and can grow up to 8 feet in height at maturity, depending on the species and growing conditions. When I planted my Hollow Joe-Pye weed in late March, it was less than an inch tall. By late July, it had grown to be 3 feet tall and 2 feet wide, with plenty of flower clusters. If garden space is a concern, it is best to choose a shorter cultivar, such as “Little Joe” (*E. dubium*), “Baby Joe” (*E. dubium*), or “Phantom” (*E. maculatum*). The shorter cultivars usually grow to a height of between 3 to 5 feet. One way to manage the size of the plant is through pruning. Stems can be cut back to around 2 feet in late spring or early summer. The plant will re-sprout, be shorter and have fuller flower clusters after pruning.

### A Joe-Pye Weed Alternative, Butterfly Weed

Virginia Cooperative Extension



Butterfly Weed

If a gardener is concerned about the size of Joe-Pye weed, he or she might consider planting another Virginia native plant popular with pollinators: Butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), also known as orange milkweed, chigger weed and butterfly milkweed. This plant, named after the Greek god of medicine, Asklepios, is in the milkweed (*Asclepiadaceae*) plant family. Like Joe-Pye weed, Butterfly weed is a native perennial wildflower that (as its name suggests) attracts butterflies and other pollinators. It is a larval host plant for Monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*) and other butterfly species. Unlike Joe-Pye weed, the Butterfly weed will not

have a towering presence in a home garden, because it only reaches a height of about 3 feet at maturity.

#### Butterfly Weed Growth Habits

Butterfly weed is cold hardy. It grows in Plant Hardiness Zones 3 to 9, and usually does well in a Northern Virginia home garden. Like Joe-Pye weed, Butterfly weed is generally easy to care for in the right growing conditions. It prefers dry, well-drained soil and tolerates drought once it is established. Butterfly weed thrives when it has at least six hours of sunlight a day (full sun) but tolerates getting between two to six hours of sunlight a day (part shade). During its bloom time, which is between June and September, Butterfly weed forms clusters of small flowers on top of stems. These flower clusters are usually orange, but also come in red and yellow.

This native plant is susceptible to attacks by oleander aphids. For aphid control, a gardener can wait for assistance from beneficial insects, use a water sprayer to knock insects off the plant every other day for a week or use horticultural oil according to its application instructions. Butterfly weed can also experience crown rot, rust and leaf spot problems if it is in persistently wet soil.

Both Joe-Pye weed and Butterfly weed are fantastic additions to a Northern Virginia home garden. Their blossoms are attractive and will surely add visual interest to any landscape. More importantly, these native plants provide food for pollinators from summer into fall. A gardener who plants them will be rewarded with frequent visits from butterflies and other pollinators. I can confirm that the plant expert at the local nursery is right; my Hollow Joe-Pye weed is easy to care for and has been a butterfly magnet since late July when it began to bloom. I usually see no less than a dozen butterflies a day. Maybe next year, I will expand my native pollinator patch by adding some Butterfly weed plants as well.

### References

- [A Comparative Study of Joe-Pye Weeds \(\*Eutrochium\* spp.\) and Their Relatives](#), Richard Hawke, Chicago Botanic Garden
- [Plant Profile, \*Eutrochium\* Raf., Joe Pye Weed](#), Natural Resources Conservation Service, United States Department of Agriculture
- [Hollow-Stemmed Joe-Pye Weed, Plant Fact Sheet](#), Natural Resources Conservation Service, United States Department of Agriculture
- [Hollow Joe Pye Weed \(\*Eutrochium fistulosum\*\)](#), Forest Resources AgResearch and Education Center, University of Tennessee
- [Native Plants for Northern Virginia](#), Plant NoVA Natives Campaign
- [Joe-Pye Weed](#), HGIC 1191, Home and Garden Information Center, Clemson University Cooperative Extension
- [Butterfly Weed \(Milkweed\)](#), College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Home and Garden Information Center, University of Maryland Extension
- [Asclepias Tuberosa](#), Virginia Cooperative Extension, Virginia Tech
- [Asclepias Tuberosa](#), Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox, North Carolina State Cooperative Extension
- [Butterflyweed, Asclepias Tuberosa](#), Susan Mahr, Master Gardener Program, Division of Extension, University of Wisconsin-Madison
- [Plant Profile, Asclepias Tuberosa L., Butterfly Milkweed](#), Natural Resources Conservation Service, United States Department of Agriculture