

Care Instructions for a Black Knight Butterfly Bush

Black Knight butterfly bush (*Buddleja davidii* "Black Knight") is a sturdy, low-maintenance shrub that provides large spikes of deep purple blooms from early summer until autumn. At maturity, this sun-loving shrub reaches heights of 6 to 8 feet, with a spread of 3 to 5 feet. The plant, a butterfly and hummingbird magnet, is suitable for growing in U.S. Department of Agriculture plant hardiness zones 5 through 9.

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Water

Black Knight butterfly bush is a drought-tolerant plant that thrives in nearly any well-drained soil. However, the shrub benefits from regular irrigation while it's becoming established during the first year, but only during hot summer weather thereafter. Water the plant deeply, providing enough moisture to soak the soil to a depth of 8 to 10 inches. Always allow the soil to dry between waterings, as the plant is prone to root rot in muddy soil.

Mulch

The butterfly bush benefits from a thin layer of compost applied around its base every spring. Top the compost with 2 to 4 inches of mulch, which helps the butterfly bush in a number of ways. A layer of mulch keeps weeds in check, conserves moisture, protects the roots during chilly winters and improves the soil as it decomposes. Use a natural mulch such as compost, bark chips, dry grass clippings or chopped leaves.

Fertilizer

A butterfly bush generally requires no fertilizer, especially if the soil is rich in organic material or the shrub is mulched regularly. Too much fertilizer may result in a lush, green plant with few blooms. If the soil is poor or the plant displays foliage that is pale green instead of deep green, apply a balanced, slow-release granular fertilizer in early spring. Sprinkle the fertilizer on the ground around the bush at the rate suggested on the container. Fertilize the shrub just prior to an expected rainfall; otherwise, water the plant deeply after applying fertilizer.

Maintenance

Butterfly bush blooms profusely until autumn if wilted blooms are removed regularly. This process, known as deadheading, also prevents the shrub from reseeding itself -- butterfly bush can become weedy. Leave a few blooms on the plant in autumn if you want it to reseed, but remember that the wind can carry the seeds a great distance. The shrub also benefits from a hard pruning every year. Cut the plant down to the ground and it will respond with more flowers, vigorous growth, a neat appearance and an attractive shape.

Problems

Healthy butterfly bushes usually aren't bothered by pests. However, spider mites often attack the shrub, usually in dry, dusty conditions or when the plant is water-stressed. Insecticidal soap sprays are a safe and effective treatment but the spray, which kills only on contact, must be reapplied regularly. Butterfly bushes are sometimes bothered by various caterpillars, which are capable of stripping a plant very quickly as they chew holes in the leaves. You can pick the pests off by hand and drop them in a bucket of soapy water. If the infestation is heavy, spray the shrub with *Bacillus thuringiensis*, a natural substance that helps keep the pests under control. The substance works best when applied soon after the larvae hatch.

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