

Help the Monarch Butterfly by Planting Milkweed Species

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“Monarch butterfly populations are declining due to loss of habitat. To assure a future for monarchs, conservation and restoration of milkweeds needs to become a national priority.”

- Chip Taylor, Director, Monarch Watch

The data are staggering. Monarch butterfly populations overwintering in Mexico dropped 59 percent in 2013. Monarchs migrate from the United States and Canada to spend the winter in mountaintop fir forests in central Mexico. After declines six of the last seven years, there are now only one-fifteenth as many butterflies as there were in 1997.

This decline can be attributed to a variety of factors, including the loss of their host plant, milkweeds. Monarchs are eternally connected to milkweeds. It is said that monarchs can smell a nectar source from up to two miles away. Their offspring, the emerging caterpillars, feed exclusively on the leaves of milkweeds. The incredible metamorphosis from a caterpillar to an emerging adult monarch butterfly can only happen after devouring milkweed leaves. The monarch caterpillars ingest the milky sap from the leaves making them unsavory to predators. This delicate life cycle is amazing.

So what can you do to help stem the tide of this devastating population decline? You can support the monarch populations by planting milkweeds and other nectar plants in your landscape. Here are several species that Monarch Watch recommends:

1. Butterflyweed (*Asclepias tuberosa*): King of our native milkweeds and a monarch magnet. The bright orange color makes it one of the most recognizable wildflowers in the prairie. It blooms during the hottest part of the year from June to August. Plant in full sun and medium, well-drained soil. Grows 18-24” tall. Variety ‘Hello Yellow’ has bright yellow blooms.
2. Common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*): A buffet for monarchs. The fragrant pink blooms develop in June and July attracting a host of pollinators. Be aware! It will spread, so give it a home where it can roam. Full sun, grows 24-48” tall.
3. Swamp milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*): Thrives in wetter conditions. The soft pink blooms appear in late summer as monarchs migrate south. Plant it in full sun. 3-5’ tall. ‘Ice Ballet’ is a variety with white flowers.
4. Showy milkweed (*Asclepias speciosa*): It is similar to common milkweed, but with larger pinkish-purple flowers. The wide leaves are excellent food for monarchs. Give it space to roam, because it spreads by underground rhizomes and will take over small landscape plantings. Full sun, 24-48” tall.

Other nectar plants monarchs prefer: 5. Blazing star (*Liatriis* sp.), 6. Goldenrod (*Solidago* sp.), 7. Aster (*Aster* sp.), 8. Black-eyed susan (*Rudbeckia* sp.), 9. Wild bergamot (*Monarda* sp.), and 10. Coneflower (*Echinacea* sp.).



Monarch caterpillar

