

Saving the Monarch Butterfly

What gardeners can do to help by Suzanne DeJohn



A monarch butterfly gets nectar from a Mexican sunflower. Photo by Suzanne DeJohn



A monarch caterpillar and chrysalis on milkweed plant.

INCREDIBLE. That's the word that comes to mind when I think about the monarch butterfly. An insect with a body the size and weight of a paper clip can migrate 1,500 miles or more. Not once, but twice in its lifetime. First in autumn, when it flies to a specific overwintering site in Mexico — a trip it has never taken before. And again in spring, when it returns north to reproduce. Just incredible. These miraculous creatures are in trouble. Though monarch populations have been declining during the past decade, they've seen sharp declines in the last few years. Scientists now believe this is a long-term trend, rather than a short-term phenomenon caused by specific weather events, such as drought or hurricanes.

Like other gardeners nationwide, I mourned the absence of

monarchs last fall. Not a single one on my aster plants, which are normally swarming with them. What can gardeners do to help?

Create a Welcoming Habitat

Though you can't single-handedly bring back the monarchs, you can make your landscape friendly to monarchs throughout their lifecycle by creating an inviting place to lay eggs, sip nectar, or find shelter on a chilly evening.

- **Grow caterpillar plants.** Monarch caterpillars are fussy eaters. Adults lay eggs only on milkweed (asclepias species), because that's the only plant the caterpillars



Butterfly milkweed (*Asclepias tuberosa*)
Photo: AmericanMeadows.com

will eat. No milkweed, no monarchs. Although there are over 100 species of milkweed, some of the most widely adapted and readily available include common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*, a favorite of monarchs), swamp milkweed (*A. incarnata*, which thrives in moist soil) and butterfly milkweed (*A. tuberosa*, which prefers well-drained soil). Seeds are available from [American Meadows](#) and [Prairie Nursery](#). You'll find more milkweed plant and seed suppliers at Monarch Watch, a group dedicated to monarchs.



Common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*)
Photo: [AmericanMeadows.com](#)



Swamp milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*)

- **Grow nectar plants.** Adult monarchs must get all their energy by sipping nectar. Plants in the sunflower family, which includes asters, black-eyed Susans, calendula, coreopsis, purple coneflowers and zinnias, are particularly nectar-rich. Look for "single" varieties whose flowers consist of a ring of petals surrounding a central disk, rather than "double" varieties, whose blooms are filled with petals and lack a central disk. Singles tend to have more nectar.
- **Complete the habitat.** Butterflies need a landing pad to drink and they love mud puddles. Create a few shallow divots in bare soil and keep them moist, so butterflies can sip water and get much-needed minerals from the soil. Plant trees and shrubs where butterflies can roost at night. Butterflies can't fly when they're cold, so place large, flat rocks in locations that receive morning sun to give them a place to warm up.
- **Certify your backyard as a Monarch Waystation.** Contribute to monarch conservation by joining thousands of people who have created these certified monarch habitats in home gardens, at schools and businesses, and along roadways. Monarch Waystations provide the food and shelter that monarchs need to live, reproduce and sustain their migration. Encourage your neighbors to do the same.

Use Pesticides with Care

The pristine lawns and landscapes that many have come to associate with a well-tended home have come at a cost: A surprising amount of pesticides are used to maintain them. As a nation, we need to reconsider our definition of a well-maintained yard and allow a few (nectar-rich) dandelions and other "imperfections." Here are some ways you can minimize the use of pesticides.

- **Identify pests before treating.** Just because you see an insect near a chewed leaf, don't assume it's the culprit.



Yellow grains of pollen cling to a monarch as it sips nectar from a zinnia flower. Photo: [Suzanne DeJohn](#)

Always identify what is causing the damage before spraying any pesticides — even organic ones. Remember that about 95 percent of the insects you see in your garden are either helpful or harmless!

- **Choose least-toxic pest controls.** Whenever possible, use barriers, such as row covers, to exclude pests or traps that target specific pests. Instead of spraying, hand-pick pests, such as tomato hornworms or small populations of Japanese beetles.

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- **Encourage natural controls.** Birds and beneficial insects can go a long way toward maintaining balance in your landscape. Create a welcoming habitat with **feeders and shelters**.
- **Tolerate some damage.** Keep in mind that caterpillars are butterfly and moth larvae. Overlook some feeding damage on plants as part of the process in creating a welcoming butterfly habitat.

Act Locally, Act Globally

- **Advocate for monarchs in your community.** Your local wildflower society, state native plant society, garden club or Master Gardeners may offer opportunities to advocate for monarchs and to create Monarch Waystations in community gardens, parks and along roadsides.
- **Join a citizen scientist project.** Citizen science is the collection of scientific data by individuals who are not professional scientists. For example, participants in the Monarch Larva Monitoring Project collect data on monarch larva populations and milkweed habitat to help scientists better understand how monarch populations vary over time and location. Journey North citizen scientists track monarch migration and report their observations to real-time maps.
- **Get involved in the state/national/international campaign to save monarchs.** The plight of the monarch is making headlines, as scientists, agriculture experts and policy-makers struggle to come up with a solution to this complex problem. Deforestation in their overwintering grounds in Mexico has long been blamed. However, research is now showing that the widespread planting of genetically engineered, herbicide-resistant corn and soybeans in the Midwest — and the associated huge increase in herbicide spraying — has killed off the native milkweed historically found in abundance in and around farmers' fields, removing a tremendous amount of monarch habitat. Therefore, agricultural practices can potentially play a huge role in reinvigorating monarch populations. When farm policy is being debated, make your voice heard by contacting your state and national representatives.
- **Learn and share.** From egg to larva to pupa to adult, butterfly metamorphosis has captured the hearts of poets and writers. And scientists still don't understand the marvel of monarch migration — how successive generations of butterflies are able to navigate to a place they've never been before. Consider volunteering to make presentations about these fascinating creatures to local school and community groups.

You'll be helping children and adults make a stronger connection to nature, and show them ways they, too, can help save the monarch butterfly before it's too late.

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A monarch butterfly on sunflower. Photo: Suzanne DeJohn