

Garden to help monarchs

Many of us are aware of the declining monarch population for several reasons including the loss of habitat where they overwinter in Mexico and the decrease of milkweed in the United States. Gardeners may not be able to influence the choices farmers or governments make, but they can have a positive impact by designing butterfly-attracting gardens, planting monarch-friendly plants, and reducing the use of pesticides.

Plant a garden specifically for monarchs and other butterflies, or find spaces to tuck their preferred annuals and perennials in existing gardens. Most butterfly gardens are planted in full sun, but gardeners with partly sunny conditions can invite butterflies into their landscapes, too, as long as there are sunny places where butterflies can warm their wings.

Provide mud puddles or damp areas to satisfy their need for water. If these areas don't occur naturally, fill a saucer with sand, dig it into the garden, and keep it damp.

Butterflies favor areas sheltered from wind. Plant or provide windbreaks, such as hedges or fences, if the garden is exposed. Hedges will also afford them protection from predators.

To attract monarchs plant milkweed. It is the only plant on which monarchs will lay their eggs. It is the only food monarch caterpillars will eat. The leaves of milkweed contain a toxic sap that, when eaten by caterpillars, makes them toxic to predators, too. This protection remains in adult butterflies. The flowers of milkweed offer nectar to monarchs and a host of other pollinators.

The types of perennial milkweed commonly found at local garden centers are *Asclepias incarnata* (swamp or marsh milkweed) and *Asclepias tuberosa* (butterfly weed). Both of these are friendlier in home gardens than *Asclepias syriaca* (common milkweed), considered a weed by some because it spreads aggressively by rhizomes. Whichever type of milkweed is chosen, plant in large groups so caterpillars have enough to eat without affecting the beauty of the garden.

Swamp or marsh milkweed grows 3 to 4 feet tall. It prefers a spot in full sun and moist soil, but easily adapts to average garden soil. Clusters of white or pink flowers bloom at the tops of stems in summer.

Butterfly weed is shorter, struggling to reach much more than two feet tall. It is easy to grow in full sun in average to dry soil. Bright orange flowers glow in the garden all summer long.

After flowers are spent, seed pods form on both marsh milkweed and butterfly weed. When they split open, they liberate seeds with silky 'hair' that catch breezes to carry them around the landscape.

In addition to milkweed, plant a variety of other perennials that are either host plants or nectar sources for monarchs and other butterflies. Be sure there are blooms throughout the summer and into fall so butterflies have consistent resources. Asters, bee balm, black-eyed Susan, blazing

star, coneflowers, garden phlox, goldenrod, ironweed, Joe Pye weed, and yarrow are just the tip of the proverbial iceberg of choices.

Join the effort to help monarchs. Other butterflies and pollinators will also benefit, and your garden will come alive with their color and motion.

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