

Welcoming Monarchs to Your Garden

Portland Monarchs ~ SaveTheWesternMonarchs.com ~ Ida Galash

Providing what monarchs and other butterflies need for food, shelter, and host plants for the caterpillars, invites them to your garden and helps them survive and thrive. While you are planning or adding to your butterfly habitat, there are some things to keep in mind. These suggestions are geared toward attracting monarchs, but other butterflies will likely agree.

CHOOSE ORGANICALLY GROWN PLANTS. The last thing you want to do is plant a beautiful garden of poison-laced plants. Those perfect looking plants at many big stores have likely been treated with pesticides/insecticides. *Butterflies are insects!* If the tag does not say “organic” it quite possibly is not. Don't assume your favorite garden retailer sells only organically grown plants. They probably buy from many growers. You have a right to know how the plants you are considering were grown. Ask. If the store can't tell you, contact the grower listed on the tag. **If growers know pesticide-free plants are important to the ultimate customers, they will pay attention.** Choose where you spend your money with the butterflies' best interest in mind. Of particular concern are Neonicotinoids, or “Neonics” for short. They persist in the plant and, as they are water soluble, can leach into the ground and be drawn up by nearby plants.

MILKWEED is needed for the caterpillars. Without milkweed there will be **NO MONARCHS**. Female monarchs will lay their eggs only on milkweed. Keep in mind that milkweed contains toxins, the caterpillars' natural defense. It makes them distasteful or toxic to predators. Always wash hands thoroughly after handling milkweed and avoid contact with the eyes. Choose milkweed varieties native to your general area. There are nearly a hundred varieties of milkweed in the US, but your native ones will be best suited for your area. In NW Oregon, Showy Milkweed, *Asclepias speciosa*, and Narrow-leaf Milkweed, *Asclepias fascicularis*, are our native milkweeds. Both will spread by lateral rhizomes and can spread by seed if pods are left to mature on the plants. If you do not have room to let it be “free range”, consider planting it in large containers. It will be happiest in the ground, but containers provide an option and can be moved around as needed. Heart-leaf Milkweed, *Asclepias cordifolia*, is found in southern Oregon, and with a warming climate, may be one to consider. I make an exception and include “nearly native” Swamp Milkweed, *Asclepias incarnata*, in my garden. It is native to most of the US and can be found on the Oregon/Idaho border. A clump-forming milkweed, it is well suited to small, urban gardens. It is also the milkweed that Fiona, the female monarch that visited my NE Portland garden in July of 2021, chose to lay her eggs on.

I try to keep the **Free Milkweed Seed Box** stocked Fall through Spring. It's located in the Monarch Habitat in the parking strip of the 3400 block of NE 24th Avenue in Portland, between Garden Fever and the Madeleine School, and parallel to the soccer field.

Milkweeds are herbaceous perennials. They die back completely in the fall. Make sure you mark their locations well. Remember what they say about perennials: “The first year they sleep, the second year they creep, the third year they leap.” If you are starting with seeds, consider adding a pot or two of mature milkweed to give hungry caterpillars a dependable supply of leaves. Monarchs do not need the milkweed to be in bloom to use it for egg laying. Females will seek out tender, new plants. The flowers, however, are a nectar bonanza.

Milkweed can also be cut back to encourage new growth and fuller plants. Be sure to carefully check for eggs and caterpillars first!

NECTAR – Nectar sources are needed for the adult butterflies' food. **Native plants are generally superior nectar sources** as plants bred for showiness or form often have been done so at the expense of nectar production.

Monarchs will look for flowers with a central disk composed of tiny flowers, surrounded by a ring of petals. Think of the form of a sunflower, daisy, zinnia, etc. Clusters of small flowers are also attractive; think of the form of ceanothus, goldenrod, pearly everlasting, lantana, etc. Make it easy for the butterflies to access nectar. Open, single forms are preferable to pompoms. Plan for blooms during the monarchs' migration time. As they head north, you will want blooms beginning in June. Be sure to include late bloomers for the southern migration through September. Of course, other pollinators will appreciate flowers outside of these months, too.

THE GARDEN – Monarchs are cold blooded and cannot fly in temperatures below 55* or even crawl below 50*.

You will want to consider:

- A sunny location for your habitat
- An open approach rather than congested space
- Group milkweeds rather than dotting them around the garden. Several plants are easier to detect than one.
- Avoid planting things of similar height around the milkweeds
- Plant milkweed at the front of the bed even though they can be 3-4 ft. this makes them easier to locate and more accessible
- A wind break for protection
- Shelter such as nearby trees or shrubs
- Add a flat "basking stone" to soak warmth from the sun and help butterflies warm themselves
- Add a "puddling station", a shallow dish or patch of ground containing soil and sand, that is kept moist, providing a safe place to get water and minerals
- A sign to let neighbors know what you are doing and why

PLANT IT AND THEY WILL COME

While Portland is not on the monarch migration super highway, they definitely do come here. Provide them with what they need and give them a good reason to start families here. So much of their native habitat has been destroyed by human activity that they will be searching for what they need to survive and perpetuate the species. They can detect milkweed from several kilometers away – even further for large plantings. I, and many who know far more than I, believe Portland will be increasingly important to our Western Monarchs.

Please note that bringing monarchs into Oregon in any stage of life – egg, caterpillar, chrysalis, or adult, is **illegal**. Provide for them and let them find you. Encourage neighbors, friends, businesses, farmers, vineyards, schools, churches, organizations, golf courses, etc. to plant monarch habitat as well. The more habitat, the better for everyone.

Report sightings of monarchs, with a photo if possible, to iNaturalist, Journey North, Western Monarch Milkweed Mapper, and of course, let us know at Portland Monarchs. Tagging and the reporting of sightings is vital to increasing our knowledge about monarchs and their actions.

Bosky Dell Natives' website has a *superb* Butterfly Plant List that has been reviewed by a top lepidopterist. It has the additional feature of including host plant information for other butterflies you might see and attract around Portland.

Want to help Portland Monarchs help the monarchs? Venmo@portland-monarchs