

Virtual Monarch and Meadow Month Lesson: Creating Healthy Habitats for Monarchs

In this lesson, participants will learn how to create healthy habitats for monarchs and other pollinators at home in your very own yard.

Monarch butterflies are in steep decline

[Population counts](#) released in March of this year estimate that monarchs overwintering in Mexico decreased more than 50% from last year and are on the threshold of species collapse. Climate change, logging of their overwintering fir forests, herbicides, pesticides, GMOs, habitat destruction, and drought have taken their toll. **What can we do to reverse this devastating trend?** One of the most crucial things that we as mere mortals can do to support monarchs is to **create habitats** in our yards that can help them to survive.



These winged marvels have a complex life cycle with unique habitat requirements at each life stage. Migrating adults returning to their northern regions must drink nectar to have enough energy to fly and lay eggs. In addition to nutritious nectar plants, they must also find milkweed on which to lay eggs and feed the caterpillars. Then in the fall the new migratory generation must feed on nectar plants as they make the return journey to their winter roosts in the Oyamel fir forests in Mexico. Monarchs need our help so they will have critical habitat available as they migrate and reproduce.

What makes a good monarch habitat?

Butterflies thrive in open, sunny meadows comprised of milkweed and a great diversity of nectar plants that flower throughout the summer and fall seasons. Not everyone can provide big open meadows for visiting butterflies, but even a small garden or narrow border can support monarchs and other pollinators. The following discussion is of things to consider when creating healthy monarch habitat.

- **Sunlight and soils:** Butterflies feed in the sun and the plants they feed on need at least 6 hours of sun a day. Milkweed is a MUST and two kinds of milkweed, common milkweed and butterfly weed, do best in well drained soils. However, swamp milkweed and most other nectar plants can tolerate a wider range of soil types.
- **Shelter:** Planting milkweeds and nectar plants close together helps to provide shelter for monarchs and other wildlife.
- **Milkweed:** Monarchs only lay their eggs on milkweed! To maximize the use of your habitat by monarchs, it is beneficial to include at least 10 milkweed plants, made up of swamp milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*), butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*) and common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*). These milkweeds flower at different times during the season. By including enough of all three milkweed species in your habitat you will increase the likelihood that monarchs will feed, lay eggs, and have enough baby food available for the larva to complete metamorphosis.



Common milkweed



Butterfly weed



Swamp milkweed

Nectar Plants. Monarchs, other butterflies, moths, bees, wasps, and hummingbirds need nectar. Nectar is the sweet liquid that flowers make to attract and reward pollinators. Not all flowers are created equal when it comes to providing nutritious plants that attract monarchs, bloom when adult monarchs are present, provide nutritional nectar, and feed monarch caterpillars. A healthy monarch habitat must provide flowers that bloom from summer through fall so they can help sustain monarchs during the breeding season and then migration in the fall. A habitat should contain a diversity of mostly native perennial plants that provide nectar for adult butterflies. Some examples of native flowering plants (besides milkweeds) that monarchs love include Joe-pye weed, purple coneflower, black-eyed Susan, ironweed, blazing star, mountain mint, goldenrods and asters. The Xerces Society has a great guide to monarch plants; view it [here](#).

Warning! *Do not plant Butterfly Bush (Buddleia sp.). Despite the name, it is an invasive shrub that does not meet the nutritional needs of butterflies!*



Joe-Pye weed



Purple coneflower



Goldenrod

Management

Like any garden, you will need to sustain it. There's mulching, thinning, amending the soil, removing dead stalks, watering, removing invasive plants and replacing plants that don't survive. It's a bit of work, but the rewards are so worth it!

Enjoyment!

In summary, monarchs' favorite habitats are sunny, green spaces filled with a diversity of native flowering plants and shrubs. Beyond supporting monarchs, many other butterflies, bees, moths, and hummingbirds and other critical pollinators will all be happy in the habitat you create...and so will you!

Additional Habitat Activity: Create a monarch habitat and register it as an official [Monarch Waystation with Monarch Watch](#).

Additional Monarch Habitat Resources:

- [Monarch Joint Venture](#)
- [Xerces Monarch Conservation](#)
- [Journey North Monarchs](#)
- [Monarch Watch](#)
- [Monarch Watch Waystations](#)
- [Where to buy Native Plants in NJ](#)
- [Creating a Garden for Butterflies, Duke Farms](#)

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