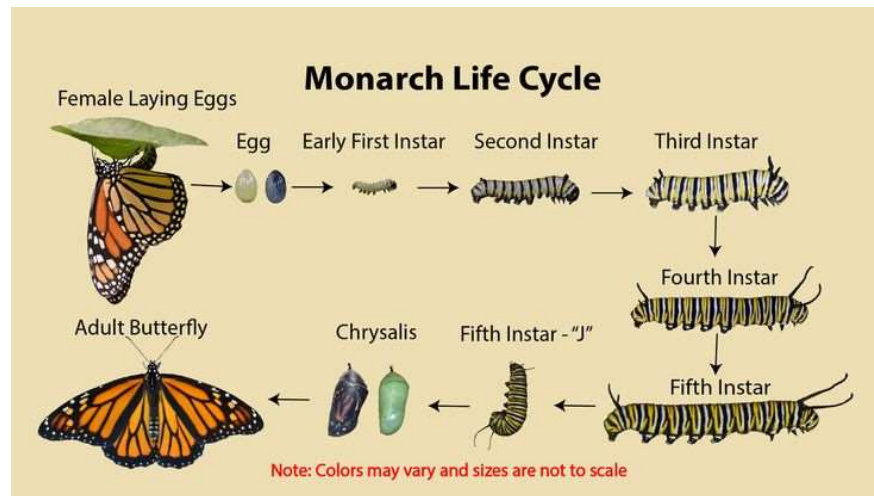




Sustaining Monarch Butterflies

by Beate Popkin

Monarchs (*Danaus plexippus*) need two types of plants: **host plants** and **nectar plants**. **Milkweeds are their host plants**. The host plants provide a place for the monarchs to lay their eggs. The emerging caterpillars then feed on nothing but milkweeds. Once they emerge from the chrysalis as adult butterflies, they require a variety of **nectar plants** for food and energy.



HOST PLANTS

All milkweeds produce a white sap in their stems and leaves (hence the name) that is toxic to many animals and also to humans. Please wash your hands and be careful not to get this milky juice in your eyes!

The three most used **host plants** are: **common milkweed** (*Asclepias syriaca*), **swamp milkweed** (*Asclepias incarnata*), and **butterfly milkweed** (*Asclepias tuberosa*). The first two bloom pink and are quite tall (5' and 4' respectively), the last blooms orange and is only 1-2' tall. These milkweeds need full sun and warm soil before they emerge from the ground. Milkweeds set seed in pods that open late in the season.

Common milkweed flowers in May and June. It spreads by underground rhizomes and, for that reason, may not be suitable for small gardens. Common milkweed has fallen victim to spraying in agricultural fields. This has contributed to habitat loss for monarchs.

Swamp milkweed does not need to grow in a swamp, but it is not drought tolerant. It needs average garden soil and some moisture during dry spells. Swamp milkweed grows in clumps and flowers in July and August.

Butterfly milkweed can drown in too much water! It should be planted in a sunny, dry site. The distinctive orange flowers bloom in June.

common

swamp

butterfly



NECTAR PLANTS

In their adult stage as butterflies, monarchs search for **nectar plants**. They sip nectar from a range of flowers usually not milkweeds. During their migration south, milkweeds are done flowering, and other plants feed the monarchs.

Here are some nectar plants that you can add to your gardens.

- 1) **beardtongue** (*Penstemon*)
- 2) **purple and Tennessee coneflowers** (*Echinacea*)
- 3) **bee balm** (*Monarda*)
- 4) **mountain mint** (especially *Pycnanthemum muticum*)
- 5) **giant hyssops** (*Agastache*)
- 6) **blazing star** (*Liatris*)
- 7) **Joe Pye weed** (*Eutrochium*)
- 8) **goldenrods** (*Solidago*)
- 9) **New England aster** (*Symphiotrichum novae-angliae*)
- 10) **calico aster** (*S. lateriflorum*)
- 11) **aromatic aster** (*S. oblongifolium*)

For more Information:

Monarch Watch

<https://www.monarchwatch.org/>

USDA Plant Data Base

<https://plants.usda.gov/>

Updated 03-2025 Ann Witherington, M.S. Botany