

Growing Milkweed for Monarchs

Milkweed is the ONLY food that monarch caterpillars eat, so a good supply is important to maintaining and growing the monarch population.

Choosing the right location:

Milkweed evolved as a field plant so it likes full sun and a well-drained soil. Monarchs prefer a sheltered location so avoid windy areas. A large shrub can provide a windbreak. Butterflies will enjoy a sunny location with rocks where they can warm themselves. Milkweed can also be grown in a container on a balcony.

Choosing a milkweed species

Milkweed species that are native to your area will provide the right signals to passing monarchs. Butterfly Weed, (*Asclepias tuberosa*), with its bright orange blooms and 60 cm height it is a good choice for an urban garden. It is less invasive than common milkweed, (*Asclepias syriaca*), so it won't take over the garden. But if you have more space and want a plant that will spread to fill it, common milkweed may be right for you. It grows to a height of 1.5 meters and has pinkish-purple globe-shaped blooms. Swamp milkweed, (*Asclepias incarnata*) is a good choice for a damp location. It grows to 1.5 meters and is non-invasive.

Planting milkweed seeds outdoors

Fall is the best time to plant milkweed seeds outdoors. Like many wildflowers, milkweed seeds need a period of cold weather to break their dormancy and germinate, a process called "cold stratification". Planting in the fall lets nature provide this cold period.

In October or November clear an area of twigs and leaves and lightly cultivate the soil to ensure good contact between the seeds and soil. Scatter the seeds with a spacing of 10 cm. Carefully mark the location with plant markers because milkweed plants are late to come up in the spring, (late-May) and you don't want to accidentally dig them up! Lightly cover the seeds with soil - but only a dusting because the seeds need light and warmth to germinate in the spring. Protect seed from squirrels with chicken wire.

Or you can put the seeds in a small pot of soil and leave it outdoors over the winter.

Growing milkweed indoors

If you want to have larger plants for the beginning of the growing season, you can start plants inside.

In late February, cold stratify the seeds by putting them on damp paper towel in a plastic bag and keeping them in the refrigerator for 3-6 weeks. Begin checking the seeds after 3 weeks. When they have germinated its time to plant them. Fill a 4” pot or plastic cup with potting soil and water well. If you use a plastic cup, be sure to poke several holes in the bottom for drainage! Plant 2 or 3 seeds in each cup and cover the cup with a plastic bag to keep the soil moist. The seeds should germinate in 7-10 days. Take the plastic bag off once the seeds germinate. Water so that the soil is moist but let it dry out between waterings. You can put the pot in a saucer when you water, but remove it once you are finished watering. You should not keep the pot in a water-filled saucer since this might encourage fungal disease. The plants should be in a sunny window or provided with artificial light. If you get several strong seedlings in one pot, cut off all but one when their second set of leaves mature, or they will be too crowded.

When the plants are about 10 cm tall, they can be transplanted into the garden or a larger container, provided that the average last date of frost has passed (mid-May in Toronto). Before transplanting, acclimate the plants to outdoor conditions for a few days by placing them in a sheltered location during the day and then bringing them indoors at night. Milkweed plants can be tricky to transplant as they get older since they have a long taproot.

For more details on growing indoors check the Monarch watch website.

First year plants

Milkweed plants work to establish their root system in their first year and may not produce any blooms or seed pods. But their leaves can still provide a meal to monarch caterpillars. Your plants will begin to bloom in their second year.

For more information:

Agrawal, Anurag A. *Monarchs and Milkweed: a Migrating Butterfly, a Poisonous Plant, and Their Remarkable Story of Coevolution*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2017

<http://www.monarchwatch.org/milkweed/prop.htm>

<http://monarchbutterflygarden.net>

<https://monarchjointventure.org/get-involved/create-habitat-for-monarchs>