

How To: Monarch Garden

Life cycle

Monarchs migrate south in fall. The adults that overwinter in Mexico mate the following spring and the females then lay their eggs on milkweed. The monarchs make their way north, following the growth of their host plant and arriving in June.

The females then lay their eggs and the caterpillars emerge three to twelve days later. They feed on milkweed leaves for two weeks.

Monarch caterpillars have black, yellow and white stripes and one pair of black filaments near their heads and another pair near the tip of the abdomen. After moulting five times, the caterpillar stops eating, attaches itself upside down under a leaf and turns into a green chrysalis.

The adult emerges from the chrysalis two weeks later. The butterfly is ready to fly off once its wings are dry and fully spread.

These monarchs reproduce. The ones in the next generation (or the one after that, depending on the weather) do not reach sexual maturity here, but instead migrate to their overwintering sites in Mexico.

Their winter rest period lasts until March, when the males and females sexually mature and mate. Most of the males die, while most of the female head north. They lay their eggs on spring milkweed shoots and then they die. It takes several generations to reach Canada in June.

[Monarch](#) butterflies are great migrators. Every June, waves of females descend on our region in search of [milkweed](#), the only plant where they lay their eggs.

Once abundant in fields and vacant lots, milkweed is becoming increasingly hard to find. There is less and less undeveloped land and fewer natural spaces in our cities, and the gradual disappearance of these habitats across North America poses a real threat to the monarch butterfly

You can help ensure the monarchs' survival by creating an oasis for them at home – a flower garden where they can feed and reproduce while putting on a magnificent show for you.

Attract monarchs to your garden in four easy steps

Before you start to create your Monarch Oasis, consult the fact sheet [Basic principles of organic gardening](#). Also make sure to comply with the bylaws of your municipality.

Step 1 – Choose the right spot

An inviting place

Butterflies like peace and quiet. Set up your garden in a sunny, peaceful area sheltered from the wind. Choose features that retain the sun's heat, such as paving stones, low walls and natural stones. The monarchs will warm up here on chilly days.

You don't need a big yard – just a small corner or a few pots on a balcony will do.

Step 2 – Choose the right plants

Number one choice: milkweed

Milkweed is essential to monarch reproduction. Females lay their eggs only on this plant, which constitutes the sole source of food for the caterpillars. There are some species of milkweed indigenous to Québec, such as [common milkweed](#) (*Asclepias syriaca*) and [swamp milkweed](#) (*Asclepias incarnata*).

If you garden on the balcony, a better choice might be the bloodflower (*Asclepias curassavica*). Treat this tropical species like an annual or grow it like a winter indoor plant.

For more information:

- [Bloodflower, a monarch magnet](#)

Plant diversity

Adult monarchs feed off the nectar of flowers. A good variety of nectar-producing plants is a valuable asset for your garden. If space permits, add more diversity by planting annuals and perennials as well as trees and shrubs.

Favour native plants that are hardy, well adapted to our climate and require little maintenance.

Here are a few plant suggestions that will help you attract monarchs and other pollinators. When choosing plants, keep in mind the characteristics of your garden.

Perennials

- Common yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*)
- Common foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*) – biennial
- Meadow blazing-star (*Liatris ligulistylis*)

Annuals or non-hardy perennials

- Sweet alyssum (*Lobularia maritima*)

- Garden cosmos (*Cosmos bipinnatus*)
- Garden heliotrope (*Heliotropium arborescens*)
- Black-eyed-Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*)
- Golden marigold (*Tagetes tenuifolia*)

For more information:

- [Choosing the right plants to attract butterflies](#)

Step 3 – Tend the garden in an environmentally responsible way

Preserve life

First and foremost, it's important to understand that pesticides, even low-impact ones, are harmful for butterflies. These products can kill caterpillars and adults, not to mention other beneficial insects.

To fight garden pests, better to attract caterpillars, lacewings, birds and other beneficial organisms.

Should a problem with insect pests, disease or weeds require that you take action, apply cultural, physical or mechanical methods. Use low-impact pesticides only as a last resort.

For more information:

- [Control methods](#)
- [Biological control: how to attract the right insects to your garden](#)

Step 4 – Enjoy summer with the monarchs

Observation site

A Monarch Oasis is a constant source of discovery for a curious observer. Visit often to see how the plants grow and change and get to know its various inhabitants.

A positive action for the biodiversity

Creating an inviting garden for monarchs is something positive and concrete that you can do to help safeguard these magnificent butterflies and for the protection of biodiversity.

Choose the right location for the right plant

During your preparations, consider the characteristics of your garden and plants. A plant that needs shade and moist soil will be much more vulnerable to disease and pests if you plant it in full sun in dry soil. Moreover, there's a high risk of it not surviving at all if growing conditions are inadequate.

Consider the amount of sunlight, soil characteristics of the site, the hardiness zone of your area and the space that plants will require when they reach maturity. Favour plants that are more resistant to pests, disease and drought, because they require less maintenance.

Nourish the soil with compost

The best way of meeting the nutritional needs of plants is to nourish the earth and its living organisms, which in turn will nourish the plants. To do that, opt for compost, the gardener's true black gold. Ideally you'll make and use your own compost, but you can apply commercial compost as well. Use it, for instance, in preparing flowerbeds or a kitchen garden, or when putting your plants in the ground. Do you garden in containers? Choose a potting soil designed for container growing that already contains compost.

For more information:

- [Organic amendments](#)
- [The ecologically responsible gardener – Choosing a fertilizer](#)
- [Container gardening](#)

Fertilize as needed with natural fertilizers

First you have to know that not all plants need fertilizing. Use fertilizers when needed, as complements to compost, especially to correct a mineral deficiency or to meet the needs of the hungriest plants. Opt for natural fertilizers (e.g., liquid seaweed, chicken manure, crab meal). To free up their nutritional elements, most natural fertilizers have to be broken down by the living organisms in the soil. Thus, in addition to feeding the plants, they stimulate the biological life of the soil, which is not the case with chemical fertilizers.

For more information:

- [Natural fertilizers](#)
- [Fertilizing trees, shrubs and perennials](#)
- [Fertilizing annuals](#)

Covering the soil

Mulch creates a protective layer that keeps soil moist for longer. It offers better protection from extreme weather in addition to limiting the growth of unwanted plants, protecting plant roots and preventing erosion. Opt for organic mulches, which enrich the soil as they decompose, just like shredded dead leaves. Avoid decorative rocks, as well as fabrics and geotextiles, as they interfere with soil and air gas exchange.

To learn more:

- [Organic amendments](#)
- [Caring for beds](#) (perennials and annuals)
- [Mulch](#) (trees and shrubs)

Ensure good water management

Water plants thoroughly, as needed (avoid superficial and frequent watering). It is preferable to water in the morning or, failing that, in the early evening. Always respect the municipal by-laws on water use. Direct the water toward the soil rather than toward plant foliage, to prevent the development of fungal diseases (fungi). Have you thought of setting up barrels to collect rainwater?

To learn more:

- [Watering the garden](#)
- [Reusing water](#)
- [Reducing water consumption](#)

Proper lawn maintenance

To promote deep rooting of grass seeds, mow your lawn to a height of about 7.5 centimeters. That way the grass will be denser and more vigorous. And it will be more drought resistant and less vulnerable to invasion by weeds. Leave the grass clippings on the lawn. They'll break down quickly and release their nutritive elements.

Aerate the soil if it's compacted, compost the lawn and fertilize moderately with natural fertilizers.

To learn more:

- [Guide to organic lawn care](#)

Limiting light pollution

Turn off garden lights at night. Avoid skyward lighting, as it can cause changes in the behaviour of birds, insects and other animals.

If necessary, install motion sensors or timers that will turn lights on only as required.

Be tolerant

Your garden will attract a multitude of unexpected guests, most of them insects. Learn to tolerate these new residents, who contribute to the biodiversity of the environment and who in the great majority of cases are harmless or even beneficial.

Should you have a problem with insect pests, disease or weeds, determine whether it's essential to take action. The beneficial organisms present in the garden (caterpillars, for example) can reduce pest populations. Moreover, vigorous plants growing in good conditions can tolerate the presence of a few unwanted insects or pathogenic fungi. To grow life, we also have to accept the little imperfections!

If necessary, apply cultural, physical or mechanical control methods. As a last resort, if these measures prove to be ineffective and the use of pesticides seems inevitable, use low-impact pesticides, adhering to the recommendations on the product label and to municipal bylaws. Note that low-impact pesticides can also kill beneficial insects.