

Key Elements of a Monarch Butterfly Garden

Each year, monarchs migrate from warmer southern areas to the north, often as far as Canada. We utilized the following 7 steps to create a Monarch Waystation at the Triangle. You can follow these same steps in your yard. Every garden is critical to address the dramatic reduction in milkweed in Illinois.

1. Milkweed is critical!

Planting milkweed is the easiest and best thing that the average gardener can do to help monarchs. It is *the* most essential building block of a proper monarch habitat; it's where the butterflies lay their eggs and the only thing that the caterpillars will eat. Always source your plants from a reputable grower that grows without using commercial pesticides or fertilizers, or start them from seed yourself. There are plenty of seed pods on the milkweed plants in the forest preserves.

2. Always keep your garden chemical free - for the monarchs and bees

Butterflies and bees are especially susceptible to chemicals, so it is absolutely crucial to avoid using any toxins in your butterfly habitat. Implement strict organic gardening practices with organic pest and weed control methods, fertilizers, and soils. At the Triangle we use cardboard boxes and thick newspaper under our mulch to avoid any herbicides in the garden. We hand pick pests from any plants by pruning off infested branches and removing them from the garden.

3. Add nectar rich food sources

Add as many nectar-rich flowering species as possible to your garden, planning for early, middle, and late bloom times to ensure that there is a constant supply of seasonal food. This helps attract monarchs as well as other butterflies and pollinators to your garden. Some plants we added include baby joe pye weed, liatris, echinacea, monarda, buddleia, rudbeckia asters, golden rod, phlox and yarrow, as well as annuals such as cosmos, zinnia, lantana and verbena. And, of course, milkweed.

Monarchs depend upon finding a diverse food supply, not only during the spring and summer when they are breeding, but also into the fall and winter when they are migrating. While ornamentals thrive during the spring and summer, most do not during the colder seasons. This is where flowering native plants are critical. Check out the Chicago Botanic Garden site for more information. <https://www.chicagobotanic.org/butterflies/gardening>

4. Add color in drifts

The more colorful a garden is the more inviting it is to butterflies. Improve your design by grouping your plantings so that there are large drifts of each color. This helps butterflies by giving them an easy visual target, and by providing a multitude of nectar-filled blooms within easy reach.

5. Water and mineral sources

Butterflies obtain extra moisture and essential minerals through a behavior known as puddling—especially during periods of drought and high heat. They will find damp surfaces, such as soil, sand, rocks, or decomposing material (wet from dew, rain, or irrigation), and suck the liquid from it. This is why having a pond, fountain, or other typical garden water feature is not adequate; butterflies need dampness more than standing, deep water. Even a ground puddle is generally too deep.

You can easily create a butterfly puddling pool by filling a shallow dish with chemical-free soil, sand, and/or low, small rocks. Place it in a spot that gets full sun, near your nectar plants, and keep it moist by watering it

every day, or set it up where it will receive a bit of daily water from a drip system. Add minerals periodically by sprinkling a bit of salt or an organic matter such as compost.

6. Warming Rocks

Butterflies are cold-blooded and rely on the warmth of the sun to maintain their body temperature. This is why you will only see them active during the warmest parts of the day. Placing flat, smooth rocks and other heat retentive materials in sunny parts of your garden will give them a warm place to rest and recharge. Additionally, damp rock surfaces provide a place for butterflies to puddle and draw out essential minerals while simultaneously warming themselves.

7. Protection

it's important to locate your monarch garden near protective plants. Trees, shrubbery, and vines with strong, woody stems and dense, durable leaves work perfectly for this; anything sturdy that the butterflies can weather a storm beneath. This also just happens to be the sort of plant that is ideal for monarch caterpillars to seek out and pupate on; they'll roam sometimes as far as 40 feet from their host milkweed searching for a secure place to build their chrysalis. You'll stumble across them in the most random places, like under the eaves of roofs, along trellises, underneath hanging pots, tree branches, and flower stalks.

For more information - <https://www.monarchwatch.org/>