

# Growing milkweeds for monarch butterflies

*You can support the survival of monarch butterflies by growing milkweeds in your home landscape or garden.*

Duke Elsner, Michigan State University Extension

The monarch butterfly is one of the most widely recognized butterflies in North America, well known for its spectacular migrations. The caterpillar stage feeds only on the leaves of plants in the milkweed family. In recent decades, the availability of milkweed for monarchs has greatly reduced because of changes in the way we use land from gardens and lawns on up to forests and fields. This has contributed to a severe decline in the population of this beautiful butterfly.

Anyone with a bit of garden space to spare can help the monarch population recover. Planting milkweeds on your property will provide food plants for monarch caterpillars and nectar sources for adult butterflies. In addition to supporting the monarch, milkweed species are important sources of nectar for dozens of other butterflies and numerous pollinating insects such as native bees and honey bees.



Monarch butterfly nectaring on common milkweed. Photo: Duke Elsner, MSU Extension

## Which milkweeds to grow

There are over 100 milkweed species in the United States, but typically only a few species will be adapted to the climate and growing conditions in a particular area. Therefore it is important to choose the correct milkweed varieties to grow on your property. Some milkweeds can spread rapidly by means of underground rhizomes, so be cautious about planting these where space is limited or other plants may have trouble competing.

## Planting milkweeds

Milkweeds can be started from seeds or as young container plants. Older milkweed plants



Monarch caterpillar on common milkweed. Photo: Duke Elsner, MSU Extension

To contact an expert in your area, visit [msue.anr.msu.edu/experts](http://msue.anr.msu.edu/experts), or call 888-MSUE4MI (888-678-3464).

Michigan State University  
**AgBioResearch**  
agbioresearch.msu.edu

are very difficult to transplant, so [Michigan State University Extension](#) does not recommend this approach.

Milkweed seeds can be collected from existing plants or purchased from commercial suppliers. Seeds need a three-month period of exposure to cold (**cold stratification**), so it is a good practice to plant seeds in autumn. Container plants can be planted in spring, but it is advisable to wait until the threat of spring frosts has passed. View the [statewide table for frost free dates in Michigan](#).

## More information on milkweeds and monarchs

- [Gardening for Monarchs](#), Monarch Joint Venture
- [Plant Milkweed for Monarchs](#), Monarch Joint Venture
- [Monarch Watch Milkweed Market](#)
- [Common Milkweed](#), USDA Forest Service
- [Butterfly Milkweed](#), USDA Forest Service
- [Swamp Milkweed](#), USDA Forest Service

### Commercially available milkweeds for Michigan

Common name	Scientific name	Native range in Michigan	Available as
Common milkweed	<i>Asclepias syriaca</i>	Throughout	Seed
Butterfly milkweed	<i>A. tuberosa</i>	Throughout	Container plants and seed
Swamp milkweed	<i>A. incarnata</i>	Throughout	Container plants and seed
Whorled milkweed	<i>A. verticillata</i>	Southern Lower	Seed
Tall milkweed	<i>A. exaltata</i>	Throughout	Container plants
Prairie milkweed	<i>A. sullivantii</i>	Southern Lower	Container plants



Butterfly milkweed with a bevy of butterflies.  
Photo: Duke Elsner, MSU Extension



Swamp milkweed flowers. Photo: David Cappaert, MSU, Bugwood.org

To contact an expert in your area, visit [msue.anr.msu.edu/experts](http://msue.anr.msu.edu/experts), or call 888-MSUE4MI (888-678-3464).

Michigan State University  
**AgBioResearch**  
[agbioresearch.msu.edu](http://agbioresearch.msu.edu)

MSU is an affirmative-action, equal-opportunity employer, committed to achieving excellence through a diverse workforce and inclusive culture that encourages all people to reach their full potential. Michigan State University Extension programs and materials are open to all without regard to race, color, national origin, gender, gender identity, religion, age, height, weight, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, marital status, family status or veteran status. This information is for educational purposes only. Reference to commercial products or trade names does not imply endorsement by MSU Extension or bias against those not mentioned.