

Saving Milkweed Seeds

One of the most famous and beloved pollinators in the world, the monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*) has experienced a virtual population collapse over the last two decades, according to surveys taken at overwintering sites in both the eastern and western United States. Similarly, the populations of milkweed (*Asclepias spp.*), the host plant for the monarch, have declined, especially in the midwestern United States. While monarch butterflies are generalists that may feed on many nectar sources, their caterpillars are specific - only feeding on the leaves of the milkweed plant. Without milkweed, this critical food source slows breeding activity and the lifecycle cannot complete.

Why Harvest and Plant Milkweed Seeds?

Milkweed propagation through seed collection and outplanting helps to increase the numbers of the host plant, thereby restoring the compromised monarch habitat. Besides, seed collection is an educational and fun activity, and one that is sure to improve your own gardening proficiency if explored.

Where Should I Look for Milkweed Seeds?

As there are many native species of milkweed, determine first which species thrive in this area. To find locally-adapted species, several internet resources are available, including [this guide](#) to Oklahoma milkweed, as well as the [USDA plant search database](#). The information and photographs provided should help in identifying species by habitat, bloom time and physical characteristics.

The Selection and Seeding Process

Wear gloves and always wash your hands after handling milkweed, because the sap is a skin and eye irritant. Always select seeds from the healthiest plants. The seed pods are spiny, and can vary in color from green (immature) to grayish-brown (mature). Look for the greyish-brown that are dried and beginning to split, an indication the seeds are ready for dispersal. If the pod is not yet splitting, gently squeeze; if it pops, it should be ready. If not, leave the pod to mature. Mature seeds should be dark brown; green immature seeds are underdeveloped and cannot germinate.



Collect the seed pods in a paper bag to avoid losing the seeds. There are many tips and techniques available online, [including this video](#), for successfully separating the seed from the coma (the fluff that allows the seed to disperse in the wind).

Dry the seeds overnight on paper towels, newspaper or a strainer, and store only when completely dry to avoid fungal growth.

Storing and Preparing Seeds for Planting

Store dry seeds in an envelope, paper bag or jar, and in a cool, dry place (like a refrigerator) for sowing in the spring, as the seeds require a cooling stratification period for successful germination. Label with variety and date harvested, because according to the University of Illinois Extension Office, most seeds should be used within three years to maximize viability. Or, if you prefer, direct sow one inch under the soil in late November, then water and mulch.

If milkweed seed-saving and sowing is new to you, give it a try this season to give thanks to our wonderful monarch pollinators and their hungry caterpillars.

Resources:

[Monarch Watch: Milkweed Propagation](#)

[Propagating Native Milkweeds for Restoring Monarch Butterfly Habitat](#)

[Iowa State University Extension: Collecting and Fall Planting Milkweed for Monarchs](#)

[The Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture: Native Milkweeds of Oklahoma](#)

[The Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation: Milkweed Seed Finder](#)