

Monarchs and Milkweed in Spring

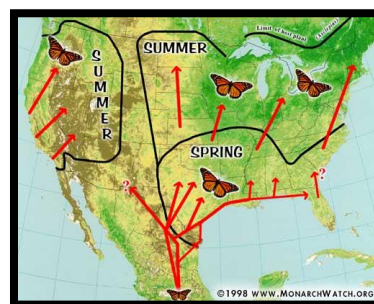


Monarch Butterfly
(*Danaus plexippus*)

Perhaps no butterfly is as iconic as the Monarch. A regal name for an insect that delights both children and adults. We rarely tire of watching Monarchs as they flit among our flowers, feeding on the nectar of favored blooms. But in Oklahoma, Monarchs are infrequent visitors. This is partly because of our location along their migration flyway and partly because of their critically declining population.

There are ways we can help their declining population but we need to understand exactly when they need our help. This way we can provide not only what they need but when they need it. To understand this timing issue, let's take a look at their natural migration pathway. This illustrates why we only see Monarchs at certain times of the year.

Monarchs begin their Spring migration northward from Mexico usually in the second week of March. These migrant generation Monarchs lay their eggs on emerging milkweed from southern Texas into the southern states as far north as Oklahoma. In Oklahoma we can expect to see Monarchs beginning in late March and continuing into June. But the Monarchs we see in March and April are generally the original migrant generation. What a journey they've made, some 1,350 miles from their wintering habitat in the mountains near Mexico City to Northeastern Oklahoma. Along their journey they will mate, lay eggs and, having fulfilled their life cycle, they will die.



Monarch Spring/Summer Migration
(Monarch Watch.org)

This is an important timing to know for us as gardeners to help in the recovery of the Monarch population. They not only need nectar sources for the journey into Oklahoma, the females need milkweed to lay eggs on. Flowers that bloom in late March and April are especially important for nectar for this migrant generation. Even more important, though, are milkweed varieties that emerge in late March through April. Monarchs certainly appreciate nectar for energy at this time of year, but appreciate even more the milkweed on which they can lay their eggs.



Green Antelope Horn Milkweed
(*Asclepias viridis*)

One of the best milkweed varieties for early growth and blooming in our area is Green Antelope Horn (*Asclepias viridis*), an Oklahoma native with a huge number of attractive qualities. Easily manageable in the garden, it only grows 20" to 30" tall and 15" to 24" wide. Drought tolerant, it is also tolerant of poor soil and bears stunning flower clusters that bloom from April-September.

Viridis will self-seed if the pods are left to ripen and split open in the garden. New plants can easily be dug up and shared with friends and neighbors. *Viridis* will also gently spread by rhizomes but can easily be controlled and is not considered invasive like its punk-rock cousin, *A. syriaca*-the common milkweed which is much better suited to large, naturalized areas.

Another early growing and blooming variety, though a bit more difficult to find, is another Oklahoma native, the Fourleaf Milkweed (*Asclepias quadrifolia*), also known as Whorled Milkweed. It loves full sun but will also tolerate part-shade. Fourleaf is drought tolerant and tough, yet has showy fragrant flowers that attract not only Monarchs but other pollinators from April-July. Growing easily from seed, it will reach 12" to 24" in height and 12" to 18" around. It will also reseed and will slowly stretch its colony by rhizomes but, again, is not invasive.



Fourleaf Milkweed (*A. quadrifolia*)

The Monarchs we see in Oklahoma in May and June are usually from the first generation produced from eggs laid in Texas and here in Oklahoma. This generation is heading north to continue migration and is well served by both nectar plants and milkweed species that grow and bloom in late Spring and early Summer.

Butterfly Milkweed (*A. tuberosa*) with its glowing golden blooms is a favorite of both gardeners and Monarchs. For wetter areas, Swamp Milkweed (*A. incarnata*) and Prairie Milkweed (*A. sullivantii*) are both attractive and appropriate. Surprisingly, once established they tolerate well-drained garden soils as well.

After June there is a pause in Monarch sightings, though some mistake the Viceroy Butterfly for the Monarch since they are so similar in appearance. The pause is because the Monarch migration has moved to the Upper Plains and other northerly spaces for the Summer. Here they will feed and mate and bear more generations until the sun begins to slip southward in its trajectory heralding the Autumn migration.

If you have done any reading about Monarchs, you will know that their population east of the Rockies has declined more than 90% since the 1970s. The Western population, west of the Rockies, has seen an even more precipitous plunge.

One thing that is known is that planting more milkweed is essential for the survival of the species. As roadway rights-of-way are mowed and wild milkweed populations are plowed under for food crops, and as food crops are sprayed with herbicides and insecticides, Monarchs are losing their milkweed. As gardeners, as a huge group of Monarch-caring individuals, we can help. We can provide milkweed for Monarch caterpillars and we can provide plants that optimize the nectar that Monarchs need.

Stay tuned next month for more about Monarchs and Milkweed for the Fall migration.

In the meantime, explore some more about Monarchs and Milkweed by seeing more pictures and reading more information at these links:

[Monarch Watch](#)

[Native Milkweeds of Oklahoma, the Kerr Center](#)

[Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Finder](#)

[Monarch Joint Venture--Busting Milkweed Myths](#)