

Monarchs and Milkweed: Fall Migration

June now and our summer solstice approaches, an important day for gardeners. It is a measuring day. It is the day when the sun reaches its northernmost position in the sky, providing us with the most daylight hours. Though the brutal Oklahoma heat and the most challenging gardening days of the summer lie ahead, there will be fewer minutes of sunlight each successive day.

We won't notice it much in the first few weeks, but the natural world takes note of such annual measuring days.

By the summer solstice, the generation of Monarch butterflies that hatched from eggs on our spring milkweed have migrated further north. Within three to four generations, the Monarch population will have expanded to the northern limit of native milkweed growth and the northern limit of migration. In the Upper Great Plains and Upper Midwest, the Cornbelt as it's often called, the success of summer feeding and breeding will contribute much to the size of the population that migrates to Mexico.



Monarch Migration, spring and fall

As the days shorten in these northerly latitudes, from Michigan and Minnesota and Manitoba, Monarchs sense the sun moving southward and begin their journey south as well. In Oklahoma, after a mid-summer hiatus, we begin to see Monarchs again. Sometimes in late August but more often from September into October the Monarchs arrive. They are not returning. The generation that graced our gardens in the spring have long since died. These autumn migrants have never been to Oklahoma. But they found their way here and they know the way to Mexico, even to an exact spot in Mexico.

Most of these autumn migrants are in sexual diapause and will not mate and lay eggs until next spring. But some females may be carrying eggs and others may be mating. All these migrating Monarchs will need nectar, lots of nectar to carry them on the next 1,350 miles of their journey. And, of course, milkweed for those with eggs.

For the Monarchs, gardens need plants that flower in late summer and into autumn. Great choices include asters and coneflowers, sunflowers and black-eyed susans, the lovely exclamation points of liatris, the graceful sways of goldenrod. Even annual cosmos and zinnia bloom well into the fall.

There are many species of each and many cultivars of each species. Single blooms usually provide more nectar than double. Native species usually offer more than non-natives. Nectar is energy and Monarchs need lots of energy for their long journey.

In Oklahoma, milkweed that thrives in late summer provides both nectar for adults and food for hungry caterpillars. Now the wildly aggressive Common Milkweed (*A. syriaca*) growing in fields and ditches along county roads and highway rights-of-way become very important for Monarchs.



Swamp Milkweed (*A. incarnata*)

Good milkweed choices for our gardens are those that thrive well into August and September. Swamp milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*), though requiring more water than others, provides growth and bloom through October. It develops a deep taproot so, once established, is best left undisturbed. It can grow 3-4' tall on branching stems and its flowers are attractive not just to Monarchs, but to all butterflies.

Growing 1-3' tall, Whorled Milkweed (*A. verticillata*), blooms from May-September. Its unbranched stems graced with narrow, needle-like leaves present an airy, open feel to the pollinator garden. While spreading slowly by rhizomes, plants are not considered invasive. Digging rhizomes and sharing with friends is always welcomed in the gardening community.



Whorled Milkweed (*A. verticillata*)

The Green Antelope Horn milkweed (*A. viridis*) which supported the spring migration, continues to support the fall migration, growing and blooming through September.



Butterfly Milkweed
(*A. tuberosa*)

Loved for its bright orange blooms, another good milkweed for the late summer garden is the appropriately named Butterfly Milkweed, *A. tuberosa*. No weed at all, the bright blooms not only attract gardeners and Monarchs, but with their copious nectar, also attract other pollinators.

Spring and Fall. Nectar and Milkweed. Just what the Monarchs ordered. Plant well for these seasons and you'll not only enjoy the fluttering beauty of the Monarchs, but you'll be helping to feed these migrants as they pass through and helping their population rebound after years of dwindling numbers.

For more reading and information, check out the links below:

[Kerr Center Guide to Native Milkweeds of Oklahoma](#)

[Okies for Monarchs: Plant List for Eastern Oklahoma](#)

[U.S Forest Service: Monarch Butterfly Migration](#)

[Monarch Watch](#)