



STORY AND
PHOTOGRAPHY
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homegrown MONARCHS

The rapid decline of the monarch butterfly population has received much publicity in recent years, and you may have noticed how rarely you spot one compared to years past. Many factors affect this gorgeous but sensitive species, including climate change, habitat loss and herbicide or insecticide spraying. Current studies show that, if existing trends continue, monarch populations could face migratory collapse within the next 20 years. Want to give these stunning creatures a much-needed helping hand? There are several ways to help ensure a brighter future for monarchs.

1 **Plant milkweed**

Milkweed is beautiful, easy to grow and the only plant monarch butterfly larvae (caterpillars) can consume. Planting milkweed provides sustenance for monarch caterpillars via the leaves, and adult monarch butterflies via the flower nectar. Choose from these native varieties:

Common milkweed – *Asclepias syriaca*
Swamp milkweed – *Asclepias incarnata*
Butterfly milkweed – *Asclepias tuberosa*



2 **No herbicides or insecticides**

Both caterpillars and butterflies are extremely sensitive to chemicals. Even a small amount can affect the caterpillar's ability to grow and form a chrysalis. Make your property a safe haven for butterflies as well as all life.

3 **Plant nectar plants**

Flowers provide necessary nectar for hungry butterflies. Large flat or umbel blossoms found on black-eyed Susan and Echinacea act as landing pads, making it easy to access the flower's nectar. Some other great choices are liatris, Aster, sunflower and goldenrod.

4 **Raise monarch butterflies at home**

Raising monarchs at home is a wondrous and rewarding experience! Read my guide to get started. *Continued on page 28*



BEGINNERS' GUIDE TO RAISING MONARCHS AT HOME

Nurturing monarch caterpillars in the home environment is easy once you understand their lifecycle. They have four stages: egg, larva, pupa and adult butterfly.

The adult butterfly lays eggs on the milkweed, and within four days the eggs hatch to form a caterpillar, which survives by consuming the milkweed. During this stage caterpillars are extremely susceptible to predation, with only a 2 per cent survival rate. Their predators include birds, ants, spiders, praying mantis, stink bugs and frogs. Within two weeks, the caterpillar attains full growth and transforms into a pupa (or chrysalis). The monarch begins this miraculous process by making a silk button and attaching it to a leaf or stem (or part of an enclosure), then it hangs in a "J" formation for about 12 hours before making its chrysalis. In the next 10-14 days a continuous process of metamorphosis occurs. Once complete, the adult butterfly will emerge, called "eclosing."

FOOD

Milkweed is the only food that can sustain monarch caterpillars. Although it's best to grow your own milkweed from seed to ensure it's free of chemicals, foraging is also possible. Stick to natural areas away from roads and industrial places, and search for plants housing other insects – it's a good sign the plants have likely not been sprayed. The best way to keep milkweed leaves fresh is to use milkweed cuttings. Cut the top portion of the milkweed plant, including a few sets of leaves and stem. Place the stem in water to keep the leaves fresh for days. A tight-mouthed glass bottle works best, to prevent caterpillar drownings.

HABITAT

I like to use fine mesh enclosures. Place enclosures on a screened porch, or indoors near a window with sunlight but no direct sun. You'll need at least two enclosures – one for caterpillars and one for chrysalises, as butterflies can sometimes carry diseases that can affect the caterpillars. (Once a chrysalis has formed and hardened for 2 days it can be safely moved and attached to the separate enclosure.) Caterpillars are eating machines and produce a lot of poop, called frass. You can line the bottom of the enclosure with paper towel and replace daily or use a keyboard vacuum to remove the frass.

EGG & CATERPILLAR HUNTING

It's fun to hunt for eggs and caterpillars! If you find either, take them in right away to avoid predation.

RELEASE

After a butterfly ecloses from their chrysalis, they need to dry their wings for 4 hours before releasing. This gives them their best chance to survive, mate and begin the cycle again.

TROUBLESHOOTING

Not all caterpillars will survive. Just like the outdoors, your indoor environment needs to be chemical-free (even topical flea and tick formulas for your pets can kill caterpillars). They can also fall prey to parasitic flies, wasps and other diseases. A great place to ask questions and get all the pertinent info is the Facebook group The Beautiful Monarch. Hope to see you there! **OH**