

Monarch Nectar Plants

Southeast



Left to right: Monarch on bristle thistle, giant ironweed, and migrating monarchs on showy goldenrod.

The Southeast region encompasses the states of Kentucky, Tennessee, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina. Reaching from the Gulf of Mexico to the Atlantic Ocean and spanning the Smokey, Blue Ridge, and Appalachian mountains, this area boasts incredible ecological diversity within a complex network of coastal marshes, longleaf pine forests, bottomland hardwoods, and mixed riparian woodlands. A diverse assemblage of wild pollinators thrives in these habitats, including summer breeding and fall migrating monarchs.

Each spring, monarchs leave overwintering sites in the mountains of central Mexico and fan out across North America to breed and lay eggs on milkweed, the monarch's host plant. Several generations are produced over the course of the spring and summer. In late summer and early fall, adults from the northern U.S. and southern Canada migrate back to the overwintering sites, where they generally remain in reproductive diapause until the spring, when the cycle begins again.

Monarchs at overwintering sites in Mexico and California have declined dramatically since monitoring began in the late 1990s. Across their range in North America, monarchs are threatened by a variety of factors. Loss of milkweed from extensive herbicide use has been a major contributing factor, and habitat loss and degradation from other causes, natural disease and predation, climate change, and widespread insecticide use are probably also contributing to monarch declines. Because of the monarch's migratory life cycle, it is important to protect and restore habitat across their entire range. Adult monarchs depend on diverse nectar sources for food during all stages of the year, from spring and summer breeding to fall migration and overwintering. Caterpillars, on the other hand, are completely dependent on their milkweed host plants. Inadequate milkweed or nectar plant food sources at any point may impact the number of monarchs that successfully arrive at overwintering sites in the fall.

Providing milkweeds and other nectar-rich flowers that bloom where and when monarchs need them is one of the most significant actions you can take to support monarch butterfly populations. This guide features Southeast native plants that have documented monarch visitation, bloom during the times of year when monarchs are present, are commercially available, and are known to be hardy. These species are well-suited for wildflower gardens, urban greenspaces, and farm field borders. Beyond supporting monarchs, many of these plants attract other nectar- and/or pollen-seeking butterflies, bees, moths, and hummingbirds, and some are host plants for other butterfly and moth caterpillars. For a list of native plants that host butterflies and moths specific to your zip code see nwf.org/nativeplantfinder. The species in this guide are adaptable to growing conditions found across the Southeast region. Please consult regional floras, the Biota of North America's North American Plant Atlas (bonap.net/napa), or the USDA's PLANTS database (plants.usda.gov) for details on species' distributions in your area.



Bloom

Common Name

Scientific Name

Flower Color

Max. Height

Water Needs

Notes

This list of monarch nectar plants for the Southeast region was produced by the Xerces® Society. For more information about monarch conservation, please visit www.xerces.org



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		Forbs		(Feet)	Low, Med, or High	All species perennials, unless otherwise noted.		
Spring to Winter	1	Clustered bushmint	<i>Hyptis alata</i>	White	4	H	Best suited to the southeast coastal plain.	
Spring	2	Bristle thistle, yellow thistle	<i>Cirsium horridulum</i>	Pink / purple	5	M	Biennial. Also attracts other butterflies and bees.	
Spring to Summer	3	Butterfly milkweed	<i>Asclepias tuberosa</i>	Orange / yellow	2	L	Monarch caterpillar host plant and nectar source for many bees.	
	4	Virginia sweetspire	<i>Itea virginica</i>	White	6	M / H	Has attractive foliage even when flowers are spent.	
Spring to Fall	5	Beach blanket-flower	<i>Gaillardia pulchella</i>	Red / yellow	2	L	Establishes easily from seed; grows as an annual, biennial, or perennial.	
	6	Whorled milkweed	<i>Asclepias verticillata</i>	White	3	L	Monarch caterpillar host plant.	
Summer	7	Slender mountainmint	<i>Pycnanthemum tenuifolium</i>	White	3	L	Attracts bees, butterflies, and birds.	
Summer to Fall	8	Blue mistflower	<i>Conoclinium coelestinum</i>	Blue / purple	3	M	Thin regularly to control spread by runners.	
	9	Calico aster	<i>Symphyotrichum lateriflorum</i>	White / purple	4	M / H	Tough plant that produces lots of fall flowers.	
	10	Dense blazing star	<i>Liatris spicata</i>	Purple	4	M	Highly adaptable and easy to grow. Attracts many butterflies, bees, and hummingbirds.	
	11	Field thistle	<i>Cirsium discolor</i>	Purple	6	M	Biennial. Native thistles have been decimated due to control of Canada thistle.	
	12	Frostweed, white crownbeard	<i>Verbesina virginica</i>	White	6	M	Amazing ice sculptures form at base of stem on frost mornings.	
	13	Giant ironweed	<i>Vernonia gigantea</i>	Purple	8	M	Thin regularly to control spread by suckers. Attracts a wide variety of pollinators.	
	14	Joe Pye weed	<i>Eutrochium fistulosum</i>	Pink / purple	7	M	Great nectar plant that attracts many pollinator species.	
	15	Purple coneflower	<i>Echinacea purpurea</i>	Pink / purple	5	L / M	Attracts a number of butterflies, native bees, and hummingbirds.	
	16	Seaside goldenrod	<i>Solidago sempervirens</i>	Yellow	8	L	Tolerates saltwater spray and sandy soils. An important nectar source for coastal migrating monarchs.	
	17	Showy goldenrod	<i>Solidago speciosa</i>	Yellow	8	L	Also frequented by a number of beneficial solitary wasps, pollen-eating soldier beetles, and more.	
	18	Smoothbeggartick, burrmarigold	<i>Bidens laevis</i>	Yellow	4	H	Wetland annual that blooms until frost.	
	19	Spotted beebalm	<i>Monarda punctata</i>	White / pink / yellow	3	L	Tolerates dry, sandy soils; blooms prolifically; highly attractive to beneficial wasps and bees.	
	20	Swamp milkweed	<i>Asclepias incarnata</i>	Pink	4	M	Monarch caterpillar host plant.	
	21	Wingstem	<i>Verbesina alternifolia</i>	Yellow	8	L / M	Attracts numerous insects, especially bumble bees. Considered undesirable plant in livestock forage.	
	Fall	22	Narrowleaf sunflower	<i>Helianthus angustifolius</i>	Yellow	3	M	Important nectar source for fall migrating monarchs. Latest flowering sunflower species.
	Shrubs and Trees							
	Summer to Fall	23	Common buttonbush	<i>Cephalanthus occidentalis</i>	White	12	M	Fragrant, showy flowers that attract butterflies.
		24	Eastern baccharis	<i>Baccharis halimifolia</i>	White	15	M	Tolerates saltwater spray and sandy soils. Good for erosion control.



Planting for Success

Monarch nectar plants often do best in open, sunny sites. You can attract more monarchs to your area by planting flowers in single species clumps and choosing a variety of plants that have overlapping and sequential bloom periods. Monarchs are present April through November in the Southeast. Providing nectar plants that bloom from spring through fall will be important for breeding and migrating monarchs in the region.

Why Plant Native?

Although monarchs use a variety of nectar plant species, including exotic invasives such as butterfly bush (*Buddleja* spp.) and lantana (*Lantana* spp.), we recommend planting native species. Native plants are often more beneficial to ecosystems, are adapted to local soils and climates, and help promote biological diversity. They can also be easier to maintain in the landscape, once established.

Tropical milkweed (*Asclepias curassavica*) is a non-native plant that is widely available in nurseries. This milkweed can persist year-round in mild climates, allowing monarchs to breed throughout the winter rather than going into diapause. Tropical milkweed may foster higher loads of a monarch parasite called Oe (*Ophryocystis elektroscirrha*), which negatively impacts monarch health. Because of these implications, we recommend planting native species of milkweeds in areas where they historically occurred. You can read more about Oe in a fact sheet by the Monarch Joint Venture: <https://tinyurl.com/89cmcaeb>.

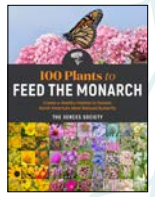
Protect Monarchs from Pesticides

Both insecticides and herbicides can be harmful to monarchs. Herbicides can reduce floral resources and host plants. Although dependent on timing, rate, and method of application, most insecticides have the potential to poison or kill monarchs and other pollinators. Systemic insecticides, including neonicotinoids, have received significant attention for their potential role in pollinator declines (imidacloprid, dinotefuran, clothianidin, and thiamethoxam are examples of systemic insecticides now found in various farm and garden products). Because plants absorb systemic insecticides as they grow, the chemicals become distributed throughout all plant tissues, including the leaves and nectar. New research has demonstrated that some neonicotinoids are toxic to monarch caterpillars that are poisoned as they feed on leaf tissue of treated plants. You can help protect monarchs by avoiding the use of these and other insecticides. Before purchasing plants from nurseries and garden centers, be sure to ask whether they have been treated with systemic insecticides. To read more about threats to pollinators from pesticides, please visit: xerces.org/pesticides.

Additional Resources

Publications & Resources

- 100 Plants to Feed the Monarch by The Xerces Society: xerces.org/books
- Gardening for Butterflies by the Xerces Society: xerces.org/books
- Attracting Birds, Butterflies, and Other Backyard Wildlife: <https://tinyurl.com/2p8c7zjm>
- Conservation Status and Ecology of the Monarch Butterfly in the U.S.: xerces.org/us-monarch-conservation-report
- Southeastern U.S. Monarchs and Milkweeds: xerces.org/publications/brochures/monarchs-milkweeds-southeastern-us
- Milkweed Seed Finder: xerces.org/milkweed-seed-finder



Websites

- The Xerces Society: xerces.org/monarchs
- Monarch Joint Venture: monarchjointventure.org/resources
- Natural Resources Conservation Service: nrcs.usda.gov/programs-initiatives/monarch-butterflies
- National Wildlife Federation: nwf.org/butterflies

Community Science Efforts in the Southeast

- Monarch Watch Tagging Program: monarchwatch.org/tagging
- Journey North: journeynorth.org/monarchs
- Monarch Larva Monitoring Project: mlmp.org
- Project Monarch Health: monarchparasites.org

Data Sources

Nectaring data and observations, background information, and other contributions to this publication were taken from the published literature and generously provided by multiple researchers, gardeners, partners, and biologists. For the full list of data sources, please visit our website: xerces.org/monarch-nectar-plants.

Have you seen monarchs on native nectar plants?

Share your monarch nectar plant observations with Xerces at <https://tinyurl.com/XercesMNPO>

Acknowledgments

Funding provided by the Monarch Joint Venture and USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. Additional support comes from Cascadian Farm, Ceres Trust, Cheerios, CS Fund, Disney Conservation Fund, The Dudley Foundation, The Edward Gorey Charitable Trust, General Mills, National Co-op Grocers, Nature Valley, Turner Foundation, Inc., Whole Foods Market and its vendors, and Xerces Society Members. This material is based upon work supported by the Natural Resources Conservation Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, under number 65-7482-15-118. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Written by Candace Fallon, Nancy Lee Adamson, Sarina Jepsen, Mace Vaughan, and Ray Moranz. Designed by Kaitlyn Rich. Formatted by Michele Blackburn & Sara Morris. **PHOTO CREDITS:** Bob Peterson*: 1, 23. Mary Keim*: 2 (cover & inside), 12, 13 (cover), 18. Peter Gorman*: 3, 17 (cover). Tom Potterfield*: 4. Ken Slade*: 5. Al Fischer*: 6. Nancy Lee Adamson, Xerces Society: 7. Evan Raskin****: 8. Dr. Annkatrin Rose (BlueRidgeKitties)*: 9. Lotus Johnson*: 10. Uli Lorimer*: 11. Eleanor Dietrich*: 13 (inside). James Gaither*: 14. Susan Ellis, Bugwood.org: 15. Sam Fraser-Smith*: 16. Per Verdonk*: 17 (inside). Jennifer Hopwood, Xerces Society: 19. Frank Mayfield*: 20. Nicole Hamilton: 21. John Brandauer*: 22. Nancy Magnusson*: 24. *Courtesy of flickr.com/**Wikimedia Commons/**CalPhotos/**iNaturalist. Photographs remain under the copyright of the photographer.

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