

Monarch Nectar Plants

Southwest



Left to right: monarch on rubber rabbitbrush, lyreleaf greeneyes, and monarch on annual sunflower.

The Southwest is a land of geological wonders and climatic extremes. Covering the bulk of Arizona and New Mexico, as well as sections of California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, and Texas, the southwest region boasts surprisingly lush riparian zones, high deserts, extensive sand dunes, wild cactus gardens, and isolated mountain ranges. Precipitation is minimal except during the summer monsoon season, when violent rainstorms can strike the region. The incredible diversity of landscapes and plant communities has contributed to highly diverse pollinator assemblages, from the hummingbird-sized sphinx moth to the brightly colored milkweed butterflies—the monarchs, queens, and soldiers.

Each spring, monarchs leave hundreds of overwintering sites along the California coast and fan out across the western landscape to breed and lay eggs on milkweed, the monarch's host plant. Several generations are likely produced during this time. In the fall, adults from throughout the western U.S. migrate back to overwintering sites in California and central Mexico, where they generally remain in reproductive diapause until the spring, when the cycle begins again. However, not all monarchs leave the Southwest – some remain in sheltered riparian areas of Arizona to spend the winter.

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, including loss of milkweed from extensive herbicide use, habitat loss and degradation from other causes, natural disease and predation, climate change, and widespread insecticide use. 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. 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 the most significant action you can take to support monarch butterfly populations. This guide features native Southwest 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. 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 will be adaptable to growing conditions across most of the Southwest. Please consult regional floras (such as SEINet, swbiodiversity.org/seinet/) or the Biota of North America's North American Plant Atlas (bonap.net/napa) for details on species' distributions in your area.

						
Bloom	Common Name	Scientific Name	Flower Color	Max. Height	Water Needs	
Spring to Summer	Forbs			(Feet)	Low, Med, or High	
	1	Desert globemallow	<i>Sphaeralcea ambigua</i>	Orange	3	L
	2	Southwestern mock vervain	<i>Glandularia gooddingii</i>	Pink / purple	1	L
Spring to Fall	3	Spider milkweed	<i>Asclepias asperula</i>	White / green	2	M
	4	Lyreleaf greeneyes	<i>Berlandiera lyrata</i>	Yellow	2	L
	5	Woods clover	<i>Trifolium pinetorum</i>	Pink / purple	1	M
Summer to Fall	6	Arizona thistle	<i>Cirsium arizonicum</i>	Red / pink / purple	4	L
	7	Common sunflower	<i>Helianthus annuus</i>	Yellow	8	M
	8	Golden crownbeard	<i>Verbesina encelioides</i>	Yellow	5	L
	9	Gregg's mistflower, Texas ageratum	<i>Conoclinium greggii</i>	Blue	2	L / M
Summer to Winter	10	MacDougal verbena	<i>Verbena macdougalii</i>	Purple	3	M
	11	Smooth beggartick	<i>Bidens laevis</i>	Yellow	3	H
	12	Cusp blazing star	<i>Liatris punctata</i> var. <i>mucronata</i>	Pink / purple	3	L
Fall	13	Lateflowering thoroughwort	<i>Eupatorium serotinum</i>	White	6	M
	14	Toothleaf goldeneye	<i>Viguiera dentata</i>	Yellow	6	M
Shrubs and Trees						
Spring	15	Sugar sumac	<i>Rhus ovata</i>	White / pink	6	L
	16	Threadleaf ragwort	<i>Senecio flaccidus</i> var. <i>flaccidus</i>	Yellow	4	L
Spring to Summer	17	Desert willow	<i>Chilopsis linearis</i>	White / pink / purple	30	L
	18	Sweetbush	<i>Bebbia juncea</i>	Orange / yellow	4	L
	19	Velvet mesquite	<i>Prosopis velutina</i>	White / yellow	30	L
Spring to Winter	20	Mule-fat	<i>Baccharis salicifolia</i>	White / pink	10	M
Summer to Fall	21	Common buttonbush	<i>Cephalanthus occidentalis</i>	White	12	H
	22	Rubber rabbitbrush	<i>Ericameria nauseosa</i>	Yellow	6	L
Fall to Winter	23	Desertbroom	<i>Baccharis sarothroides</i>	Yellow	12	L/M
Winter to Spring	24	Red barberry	<i>Mahonia haematocarpa</i>	Yellow	12	L
						



Notes

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



All species perennials, unless otherwise noted.

Drought tolerant.

Not as drought tolerant as habitat suggests.

Monarch caterpillar host plant.

Annual plant. Blooms year-round in warm weather.

Annual plant. Prefers moist soils.

Biennial plant. Drought tolerant.

Annual. A favorite of many bee species. Easy to establish and tolerant of clay soils.

Annual plant. Can be common on disturbed soils. Good late season nectar plant for butterflies.

Magnet for monarchs and queens. Handles summer heat, winter cold.

Prefers moist soils. Attracts native bees.

Annual plant. Prefers wet areas and can be used in bioswales. Attracts beneficial insects and butterflies in the fall.

Fantastic butterfly plant.

Good wildlife plant. Attracts butterflies and other insects. Seeds eaten by birds.

Extremely drought tolerant.

Extremely drought tolerant.

Prefers disturbed soils. Good for soil stabilization.

Fragrant flowers that hummingbirds love.

Flowers are fragrant. Attracts butterflies and other insects.

Deep taproot reaches water table.

Tough and easy to grow but needs moisture. Great for butterfly gardens.

Fragrant, showy flowers that attract butterflies.

Can be invasive in disturbed soils.

Can be used for streambank stabilization.

Fragrant flowers in spring and large red fruits in fall. Drought tolerant.



Planting for Success

Monarch nectar and host 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 can be present year-round in the Southwest, although this can vary depending on your elevation.

Why Plant Native?

Although monarchs use a variety of nectar plant species, including exotic invasives such as butterfly bush (*Buddleja* 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>.

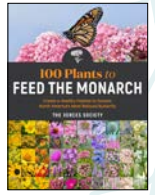
Protect Monarchs from Pesticides

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
- Guide to Milkweeds and Monarchs in the Western U.S.: xerces.org/western-us-monarch-guide
- 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 Southwest

- Southwest Monarch Study: swmonarchs.org
- Western Monarch Milkweed Mapper: monarchmilkweedmapper.org
- 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 see the Monarch Nectar Guides page on 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>

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Written by Candace Fallon, Nancy Lee Adamson, Sarina Jepsen, Anne Stine, Mace Vaughan, and Ray Moranz. Designed by Kaitlyn Rich. Formatted by Michele Blackburn and Sara Morris. **PHOTO CREDITS:** Kimberly Kling*: 1. Warren Lauzon*: 2. Patrick Alexander*: 3, 5, 18. Quinn Dombrowski*: 4 (cover & inside). Richard Spellenberg*: 6. Ken Slade*: 7 (cover), 9. Alejandro Bayer Tamayo*: 7 (inside). Forest & Kim Star*: 8. Ken Slade*: 9. Epibase*: 10. Mary Keim*: 11. Clarence A. Rechenthin, USDA Plants: 12, 16. Frank Mayfield*: 13. Carlos Valasco*: 14. Joe Decruyenaere*: 15. Cliff Hutson*: 17. Kerry Woods*: 19. Mechanoid Dolly*: 20. Bob Peterson*: 21. Tom Koerner, USFWS*: 22 (cover). NPS Petrified Forest*: 22 (inside). Katja Schulz*: 23. David Bygott*: 24. *Courtesy of flickr.com/ **Wikimedia Commons/ ***CalPhotos/ ****iNaturalist. Photographs remain under the copyright of the photographer. The Xerces Society is an equal opportunity employer and provider. © 2016 by The Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation.

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