

Monarch Nectar Plants

Northern Plains



Left to right: Monarch on hoary vervain, leadplant, and monarch on New England aster.

The Northern Plains region—which includes North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, eastern Montana, and parts of Wyoming, Minnesota, Iowa, and northeast Colorado—is dominated by vast grasslands interspersed with forested mountains and riparian woodlands. A range of climates, elevations, and soil types has led to incredibly diverse plant communities, which in turn support a wide array of wildlife, including hundreds of species of bees, flies, moths, and butterflies. Monarch butterflies depend on the floral resources in these prairies to breed and store energy for their annual fall migration.

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. Inadequate milkweed and 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 Northern Plains 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 state. 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.

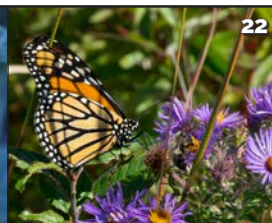
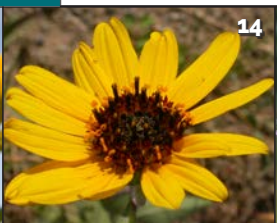


Bloom	Common Name	Scientific Name	Flower Color	Max. Height	Water Needs	Notes
This list of monarch nectar plants for the Northern Plains region was produced by the Xerces® Society. For more information about monarch conservation, please visit www.xerces.org						



XERCES SOCIETY
for Invertebrate Conservation

		Forbs			(Feet)	Low, Med, or High	All species perennials, unless otherwise noted.	
Summer	1	Butterfly milkweed	<i>Asclepias tuberosa</i>	Orange	2	L	Host plant for monarch caterpillars and excellent nectar plant for adults. Very showy flowers. Prefers dry soils and full sun.	
	2	Common milkweed	<i>Asclepias syriaca</i>	Pink	5	L / M / H	Host plant for monarch caterpillars and excellent nectar plant for adults. Fragrant flowers. Thrives in a wide range of soils.	
	3	Showy milkweed	<i>Asclepias speciosa</i>	Pink	5	M	Great host plant for monarch caterpillars.	
	4	Swamp milkweed	<i>Asclepias incarnata</i>	Pink	4	M / H	Excellent monarch caterpillar host plant and nectar plant. A great option for shorelines, rain gardens, and riparian buffers.	
Summer to Fall	5	Canada goldenrod	<i>Solidago canadensis</i>	Yellow	4	M	Attracts many species of insects. Rhizomatous and aggressive; can crowd out other plants.	
	6	Common sunflower	<i>Helianthus annuus</i>	Yellow	8	M	Annual. A favorite of many native bees, including bumble bees and longhorn bees. Easy to establish and tolerant of clay soils.	
	7	Dotted gayfeather, dotted blazing star	<i>Liatris punctata</i>	Pink / purple	2	L	Tough plant that thrives in poor, droughty soils	
	8	Grass-leaved goldenrod	<i>Euthamia graminifolia</i>	Yellow	6	M / H	Attracts many species of bees, wasps, flies, butterflies, moths, and beetles. Rhizomatous and very vigorous.	
	9	Hoary vervain	<i>Verbena stricta</i>	Purple	4	L / M	Important nectar source for butterflies. Host plant for common buckeye butterfly. Long bloom period from July to Sept.	
	10	Meadow blazing star	<i>Liatris ligulistylis</i>	Purple	5	M	The ultimate monarch magnet, even compared to other Liatris. Medium soils.	
	11	Prairie ironweed	<i>Vernonia fasciculata</i>	Purple	6	M / H	A showy plant great for backdrops in landscaping. Brilliant purple flowers. Can be aggressive in small areas.	
	12	Spotted Joe Pye weed	<i>Eutrochium maculatum</i>	Pink	6	H	Prefers moist soils. Attracts numerous butterflies and bees, including the very rare rusty patched bumble bee.	
	13	Stiff goldenrod	<i>Oligoneuron rigidum</i>	Yellow	5	L / M	This plant offers abundant and accessible pollen and nectar—a utopia for insects! Flat-top flower is unusual for a goldenrod.	
	14	Stiff sunflower	<i>Helianthus pauciflorus</i>	Yellow	6	L / M	A lovely plant, attractive to a wide variety of solitary bees. Can crowd out other plants in small areas.	
	15	Tall thistle	<i>Cirsium altissimum</i>	Pink	10	L	Not to be confused with exotic thistles, this non-aggressive native thistle is an absolute monarch magnet. Biennial.	
	16	White snakeroot	<i>Ageratina altissima</i>	White	3	L	Prefers moist soils but tolerates dry. Very shade tolerant. Attracts a variety of butterflies.	
	17	Wholeleaf rosinweed	<i>Silphium integrifolium</i>	Yellow	6	L	Great for landscaping—shorter and sturdier than other Silphium species. Attracts solitary bees and other pollinators.	
	18	Whorled milkweed	<i>Asclepias verticillata</i>	White	3	L	Monarch caterpillar host plant and exceptional nectar plant. This small milkweed plant is great for landscaping. Dry soils.	
	19	Wild bergamot	<i>Monarda fistulosa</i>	Purple	5	L / M	A superb bumble bee plant, also known as bee balm. Also attracts hawk moths and hummingbirds. Aromatic foliage.	
	Fall	20	Heath aster	<i>Symphyotrichum ericoides</i>	White	3	L	Very abundant small flowers attract pre-hibernation bumble bee queens and other insects. Blooms late into fall. Very easy to grow.
		21	Maximilian sunflower	<i>Helianthus maximiliani</i>	Yellow	8	L	Very showy and vigorous plant. Caterpillar host plant for the silvery checkerspot and bordered patch butterflies.
		22	New England aster	<i>Symphyotrichum novae-angliae</i>	Pink / purple	6	M	One of the latest fall-blooming plants. Butterfly magnet and important food resource for pre-hibernation bumble bee queens.
		23	Smooth blue aster	<i>Symphyotrichum laeve</i>	Blue / purple	4	M	A lovely plant, more delicate in stature than many asters. Larval host plant of the pearl crescent butterfly.
Shrubs and Trees								
Summer to Fall	24	Leadplant	<i>Amorpha canescens</i>	Blue / purple	3	L	Readily visited by bees and other beneficial insects. The orange pollen is very apparent on the legs of foraging bees.	



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 May through September in the Northern Plains. Providing nectar plants that bloom from spring through early 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 dame's rocket and multiflora rose, 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>.

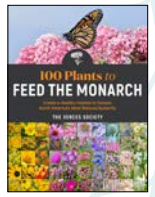
Protect Monarchs from Pesticides

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
- Pollinator Plants of the Central U.S.: Native Milkweeds: <http://bit.ly/1z7CX4U>
- Northern Great Plains Monarchs and Milkweeds: xerces.org/publications/brochures/monarchs-milkweeds-northern-great-plains
- 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 Northern Plains

- 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>

Acknowledgements

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, Anne Stine, Sarina Jepsen, Sarah Foltz Jordan, Mace Vaughan, and Ray Moranz. Designed by Kaitlyn Rich. Formatted by Michele Blackburn and Sara Morris. **PHOTO CREDITS:** Martin LaBar*: 1. Uli Lorimer*: 2, 22 (cover). Frank Mayfield*: 3. Joshua Mayer*: 4, 9, 12. Dan Mullen*: 5, 7, 20, 23. Alejandro Bayer Tamayo*: 6. Aaron Gunnar****: 8, 11. Peter Gorman*: 9 (cover). John Hilty, Illinois Wildflowers: 10. Matt Lavin: 13*, 14**. Superior National Forest*: 15. Ron Thomas*: 16. Erin Faulkner****: 17. Al Fisher*: 18. Jean Pawek***: 19. Jim Pisarowicz**: 21. Candy Sarikonda: 22. Kelly O'Donnell, Urban Flora of NYC: 24 (cover & inside). *Courtesy of flickr.com/**Wikimedia Commons/**CalPhotos/**iNaturalist. Photographs remain under the copyright of the photographer.

© 2025 by The Xerces® Society for Invertebrate Conservation. Xerces® and X® are trademarks registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. The Xerces Society is an equal opportunity employer and provider.