

Monarch Nectar Plants

California

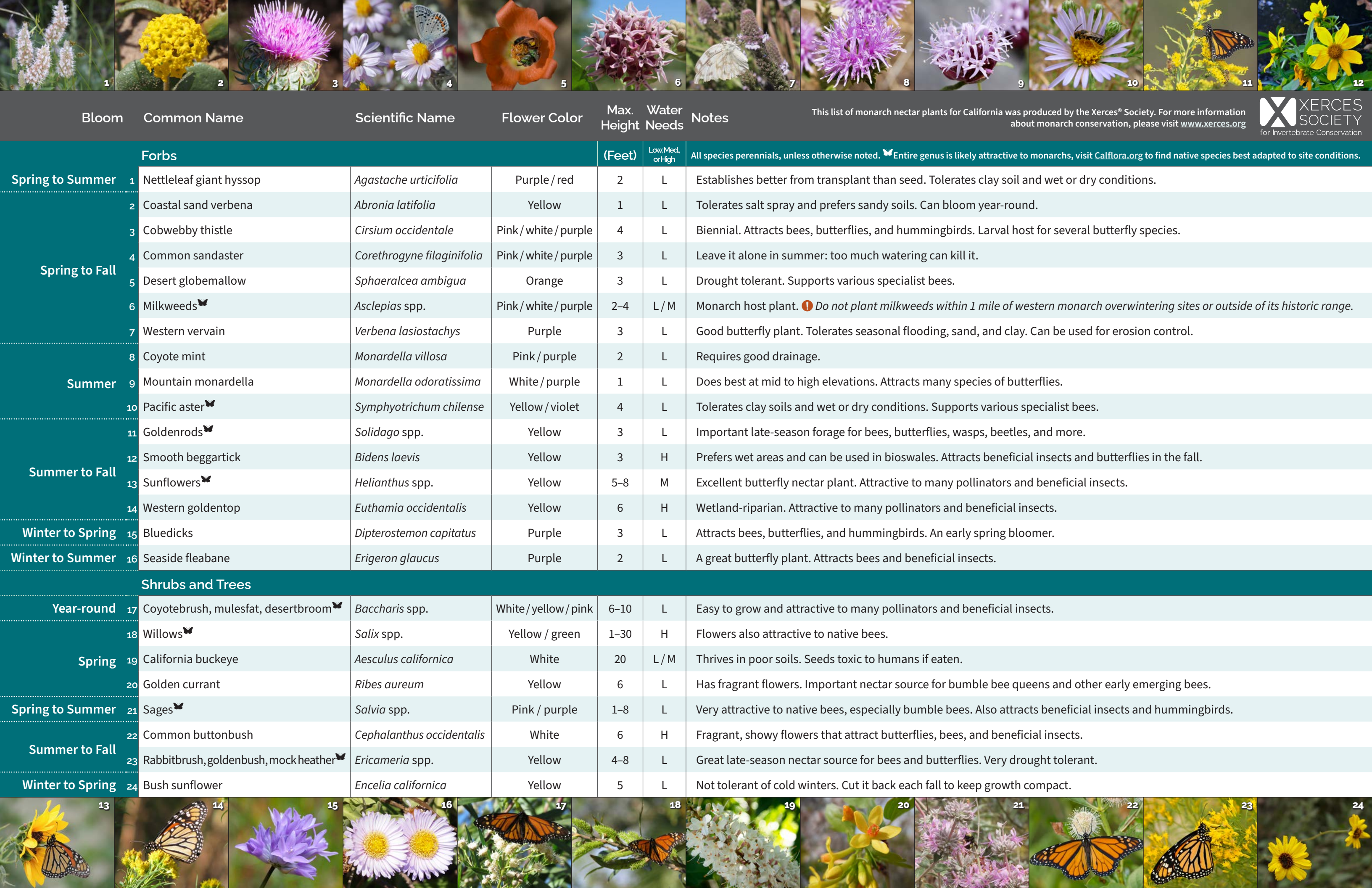


Left to right: Monarch butterflies on rabbitbush, Pacific aster, and clustered together on eucalyptus in a California overwintering site.

California is one of the most floristically biodiverse regions in the world, supporting unique plant communities such as grasslands, chaparral, giant sequoia groves, and Joshua tree woodlands. The native plants that make up these communities in turn support an incredible array of insects and other animals, including the monarch butterfly. During spring and summer, monarchs leave hundreds of overwintering sites along the California coast and fan out across the western landscape to breed and lay eggs on milkweed (*Asclepias* spp.), 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.

Once, millions of monarchs overwintered along the Pacific coast of California and Baja, Mexico. By 2018, the population of western monarchs hit a record low of less than 29,000 butterflies, which represents a 99.4% decline since the 1980's. The significant problems afflicting western monarchs include habitat loss, pesticide use, and climate change. 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 native California plants that have documented monarch visitation, bloom during the times of year when monarchs are present and are commercially available... This list is not exhaustive, but focuses on the plants that appear to be the most important for western monarchs. The list also includes moisture requirements, so that you can choose plants to create a drought-tolerant monarch garden, if needed. 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. Many of the species in this guide will be adaptable to growing conditions across most of the state, but may be less suitable for planting in the High Sierras, Modoc Plateau, and Eastern Interior Desert regions. Please consult Calflora (calflora.org) for details on species' distributions in your specific area.



Planting for Success

Monarch nectar and host plants often do best in open, sunny sites. You can attract more monarchs 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 California, so you may want to provide nectar plants for migrating and breeding monarchs from spring through fall, as well as milkweeds in the spring and summer.

We recommend planting milkweed species in their natural ranges, following nature's patterns as the best example. Using locally sourced native plant materials helps ensure that the plants are well-adapted to the climate of the planting location. Until further research is conducted, please avoid planting milkweed within one (1) mile of known [western monarch overwintering sites](#).

Why Plant Native?

Although monarchs use a variety of nectar plant species, including exotic invasives such as ice plant (*Carpobrotus edulis*) and cape ivy (*Delairea odorata*), 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. Planting milkweed too close to overwintering sites may interfere with monarch migration and overwintering behavior. You can read more about OE in this Monarch Joint Venture fact sheet: <https://tinyurl.com/89cmcaeb>.

Protect Monarchs from Insecticides

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. Neonicotinoids are toxic to monarch caterpillars. 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.

Acknowledgements

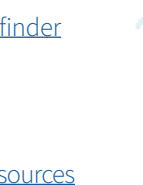
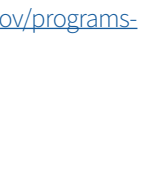
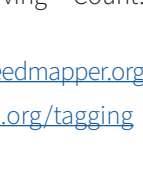
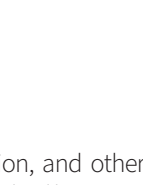
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Additional Resources

Publications

-  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-consv-report
-  Guide to Milkweeds and Monarchs in the Western U.S.: xerces.org/western-us-monarch-guide
-  Guide to California Native Milkweeds: xerces.org/ca-mw-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 California

-  Xerces Society Western Monarch Thanksgiving Count: westernmonarchcount.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, see 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>