

Raising Monarch Caterpillars in Florida

Monarchs are not as plentiful as they were years ago. In 1992, about 70% of the wintering Monarchs in Mexico froze to death in a rare 3 day freeze. The widespread use of insecticides have killed many, and herbicides have eliminated much of their wildflower nectar sources. Across the country, milkweed is disappearing as meadows and prairies are developed. In the wild, less than 3% of Monarch eggs make it to adulthood. You can help this declining population by planting milkweed.



Plant milkweed and they will come!

In Florida, the most common and hardiest milkweed variety is scarlet milkweed (*Asclepias Curassavica*.) Plant near other bright colored nectar flowers that attract butterflies. or once your plant blooms, Monarchs will find it.

Milkweed is the host plant for Monarchs (*Danaus Plexippus*) because their caterpillars will only eat milkweed. Monarchs will seek out this plant and lay their eggs on the underside of the leaves or flowers. The milkweed plant is mildly toxic, so by eating this, both the caterpillars and butterflies are slightly toxic. When most birds try to eat them, they feel sick and learn not to eat Monarchs. Other predators like wasps, spiders and ants are not sensitive to the milkweed toxins.



Source: <http://rtpi.org/monarch-caterpillar/>

Look for eggs on the underside of the leaves.

Once the egg hatches, it takes about 9-14 days for the caterpillars to grow to their full size. As monarch caterpillars grow, they shed their skin 4-5 times.



Photo Source: <http://makewayformonarchs.org/i/archives/1455>

Caterpillars will typically crawl away from their host plant and go to a higher point or find somewhere to spin a web to attach their rear antennae.



Source: <http://www.butterflyfunfacts.com/monarchqueenchrysalis.php>

*Milkweed is also the host plant for the Queen Butterflies (*Danaus ippus* which is closely related to the Monarch. The Queen caterpillar (above) is easy to identify since it has a third set of antennae.*

Then they will hang in a “J” position all day or all night before shedding their final skin and forming a chrysalis. The Monarch chrysalis is a beautiful jade green with flecks of gold and a “golden zipper.”



Source: <http://www.monarch-butterfly.com/>



Source: <http://allofnature.blogspot.com/2013/07/monarch-butterfly-emerging-from.html>

A Queen chrysalis is either green or a pinkish tan color. It will take about 10 days inside the chrysalis to transform into a butterfly. The chrysalis will start to become transparent the day before it hatches. By that night or early the next morning, it clearly reveals the butterfly wings.

Butterflies usually hatch in the early morning.

The Monarch pumps an orange fluid from its large body into the crumpled wings to expand them. (Don't worry if some drips out.) Then it must dry its wings for 3-4 hours before flying away.



Source: <http://www.monarch-butterfly.com/>

This is a rare opportunity to watch the butterfly. If you are raising a butterfly in an enclosure, do not touch the wings. After an hour you can put a piece of cantaloupe or a flower with nectar nearby and it may stretch out it's proboscis to take a sip. After 3-4 hours - take your enclosure outside so you can set your butterfly free. It needs to go feed for the day. Monarch butterflies only live an average of 4-8 weeks, but they may come back to lay more eggs on your milkweed to restart the cycle of life.



Source: <http://www.nfwf.org/monarch/Pages/home.aspx>



Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Queen_Butterfly_on_Curtiss_Milkweed_\(6010715873\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Queen_Butterfly_on_Curtiss_Milkweed_(6010715873).jpg)

Monarch and Queen butterflies look very similar with their wings folded back, but when their wings are spread out you can clearly see the thick black veins on the Monarch. Queens are also slightly smaller.



Monarch

Source: <http://www.nationofchange.org/2015/05/03/how-to-save-the-monarch-butterfly/>



Queen

Source: <http://www.butterflyfunfacts.com/queen>

Common Problems:

Wasps are the caterpillar's worst enemy. You can cover the plant with a net until they are bigger, or bring plants with eggs or small caterpillars into a screened in area or put in a butterfly enclosure.



Source: <http://redandthepeanut.blogspot.com/2011/11/large-milkweed-bugs-oncopeltus.html>



Source: <http://www.butterfliesandwildlife.com/2010/04/11/you-think-you-have-aphids/>

Monarchs and Queens may be infected with OE (Ophryocystis Elektrscirra) a microscopic parasite. It is not harmful to humans and not found in other butterflies. In large amounts this parasite can damage the caterpillar's ability to form a chrysalis, or weaken the butterfly so much that it can not emerge from the chrysalis or spread it's wings. If brown spots appear on your chrysalis, most likely it will not hatch. In Florida, cut back your milkweed after a batch of caterpillars so you can grow fresh stalks without leftover OE parasites.



Source: <http://butterflyfarms.org/monarch-predators-parasites-and-diseases/>

Milkweed bugs and yellow aphids do not harm the caterpillars, but can destroy the plant. Remove them before they multiply. Spray with soapy water and brush them off, or cut off heavily infested sections.

We'd love to see where you plant your milkweed and any visitors you attract!

Share your pictures

