



NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

Milkweed for the California Garden (August 24, 2024)

By Peyton Ellas, Tulare/Kings Counties Master Gardener

Almost everyone has heard that our beautiful Monarch butterflies across the United States are in decline. Fortunately, many gardeners and property owners, including farmers, are taking steps to help the population rebound. Habitat loss is the main reason for the decline of butterflies, according to experts. It's also at least partly responsible for the decline in bumble bees and other beneficial or desirable wildlife species. Habitat loss is due to intensive agriculture, urbanization, and the use of herbicides in cropland, pastures, and roadsides to kill weeds, and until recently, milkweed (*Asclepias*) was considered another common weed.



Milkweed is used by many pollinators and other insects, but it is essential as a food source for Monarch caterpillars. Adults can feed on the pollen of milkweed and other plants, but caterpillars rely on the alkaloid sap in the milkweed foliage and stem to make them taste bad to predators. Adult Monarchs in California overwinter in coastal forest groves and migrate to our area in the spring and summer to feed, mate, and lay their eggs on milkweed plants. The larvae emerge, eat, pupate, and, by Fall, are ready to migrate as adults. Some of the Monarchs head north instead of east and, in summer, as far away as British Columbia.

We've started to see some recovery in Monarch populations as property owners avoid further destruction of milkweed stands. In many landscapes across California, homeowners are creating colonies of *Asclepias* and other pollinator-friendly plants in their gardens and have seen Monarchs visit for the first time in years. There are a few things to understand, however, before you purchase whatever milkweed is available in the nursery center.

There are six regions of Monarch distribution, each with its own pattern of migration. California is a region by itself. The other regions are Arizona, Western, North Central, South Central, and Southeast. Each region has its own milkweed species. This makes sense since the climate is different in these different regions. In California, we have 15 species of milkweed. Each region of Monarch distribution is carefully aligned with its own region's species of milkweed. So, it is best to plant a milkweed species that is native to California.

The two California native milkweed species most commonly available in nurseries are "narrow leaf" (*Asclepias fascicularis*) and "showy milkweed" (*Asclepias speciosa*). Narrow-leaf milkweed is the most widespread species in California. In one study, showy milkweed attracted the highest number of beneficial insects in addition to Monarch butterflies. Although it's best to find locally-collected seeds or plants, the next best thing is to use native species.



Other species of milkweed that are found in our area include California milkweed (*A. californica*), heartleaf (*A. cordifolia*), woolly (*A. vestita*), and woollypod (*A. eriocarpa*).

Milkweed is fairly easy to grow in the garden. All of the above-named varieties will grow in partial sun, full sun, and partial shade. Most of them have pink, white, or purple flowers in large masses from late spring through Fall. The seeds are held in pods (fruits), and woolly or hairy stems help distribute seeds in a breeze. Don't over-water milkweed; our local native *Asclepias* do not like a lot of water in the summer! Aphids can be a problem for young plants or mature plants early in the spring. Control by spraying the plants with water or using a pesticide that is very low in toxicity, like insecticidal soap. Never use a systemic aphid killer on milkweed or on any of your pollinator plants (including roses) if you don't want to harm the insects, including butterflies, who feed on the pollen. Milkweed die to the ground in the winter and emerge again when the soil warms. Sometimes, the plants emerge quite late in the year. Don't worry! They are perennials and don't need to be replanted every year.

And what about those easily available exotic (non-native) milkweed species? The three that we found are "butterfly weed" (*A. tuberosa*), "tropical milkweed" (*A. curassavica*) with orange or yellow flowers, and "African milkweed" (*A. fruticosa*). These are not generally recommended to use as they are all designed to support Monarchs from different regions (two are not even from the United States) and have shown in some cases to have a harmful effect on the health and migration pattern of our native Monarchs. It is especially important not to plant them if your property borders any open lands in order to avoid introducing a potentially harmful invasive plant into the wild.

You should be able to find the native California milkweed in your local nursery. It's not too late to plant now--although the plant will go dormant during winter, it should reappear next spring and hopefully welcome a traveling Monarch to stop by to have a snack.

The Tulare-Kings Counties Master Gardeners will answer your questions in person:

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