



Monarch Habitat Tips for Gardeners in Urban Areas

Written by the members of the Urban & Greenspace Working Group of the Wisconsin Monarch Collaborative

Select and prepare a site

You may have only a part of your own yard to work with, but by choosing the right place, you can pack a lot of monarch-friendly plants into even a small garden bed. Even if you have more space to work with, say, a community garden, you still have to consider sun, soil, and water. Since most monarch plantings require quite a bit of sun, you should choose a sunny location.

Light me up or Sun to Shade

- “Full sun” does not actually mean sun dawn to dusk. It means 6 to 8 hours of sun. If your site gets full sun from 8 a.m. until 2 p.m., or from noon to 6 p.m., it qualifies.
- “Part sun/part shade” can mean several hours of morning sun or just a couple hours of hot afternoon sun, coupled with light shade in between. Remember that afternoon sun is a bit more intense than morning sun.
- “Shade” means shade, but it doesn’t mean a plant can’t stand a little direct sun or that it must grow in heavy shade only. Most shade-tolerant plants can take some sun and in fact do better in light shade than in heavy shade.

Give me the soil

- Most plants of all types do best in loam, which is what we think of as good, rich, dark soil that has plenty of organic matter but is well-drained; that is, it doesn’t stay wet but also doesn’t dry out too quickly.
- If you have very heavy clay or a lot of sand, you would do well to work some compost into your soil. However, note that native prairie plants are versatile and can grow in a fairly wide range of soil conditions. You don’t need to excavate your whole yard and replace the soil, just improve it a bit.
- You can have your soil tested for organic matter, pH (acidity/alkalinity) and nutrient content. UW-Extension offers these services. However, native wildflowers do not require fertilizers as do many non-native plants.

Water is life

- Wherever you plan to put your garden, your plants will need regular watering until they have become established. In your yard, this shouldn't be a problem. In a community garden or a larger restoration project, you may have to haul in water in containers. Don't choose a remote site if you cannot commit to keeping your plants hydrated until they have settled in.
- The usual rule of thumb is that plants native to your climate zone need about six weeks of care to become established. In very hot and dry weather, it could take longer. In a wet season, it could be sooner.
- Once established, native plants should not need watering. They are adapted to typical annual precipitation. In severe drought, though, even natives can suffer. Monitor, and have a plan for emergency watering, especially throughout that critical first year.

Select and purchase your plants according to a plan

The Wisconsin Monarch Collaborative offers a list of plants for the monarch gardener that are known to be hardy, easy to grow, and very attractive to monarchs. We also offer links to more extensive plant lists for those interested in greater diversity, as well as to nurseries and programs that offer these plants for sale. Here are some tips:

- Accomplished gardeners always check the height, spread, blooming period, color and other characteristics of new plants and plantings, planning for visual appeal throughout the season. Monarch gardeners can do the same. Keep shorter plants out front and taller ones in back so that butterflies can find the blooms. Select plants that will provide constant sources of nectar from spring through fall. Plant in groups rather than random arrangements.
- Avoid cultivars (even cultivars of native plants), hybrids and exotic plants, even if the label or a salesperson says they attract butterflies. Monarchs will feed on some of these plants, but they are best adapted to the native plants with which they have evolved. Ask for pure native strains or buy from a native nursery.
- Don't fret if one or two plant species just don't do well for you. Most gardeners face this problem from time to time. Don't waste time and space on futility. Go with what works for you.
- Find other like-minded people with whom you can share knowledge and experience. There are a number of native landscape groups, such as the Wild Ones, dedicated to landscaping with our native plants, and members are always happy to offer advice.
- Use potted plants or "plugs" whenever possible. This allows you to really customize your garden design for the most visual appeal and function. People can weed small plantings like they do with a garden.



Add a top layer of mulch or weed-free compost to your site before planting. This will greatly reduce weed competition, speed up establishment of your plants, and reduce the need for watering. A compost layer also provides a bit of fertilizer and improves the health of the soil beneath it.

Key resources:

- [City of Madison, WI Pollinator Protection Task Force Report](http://www.cityofmadison.com/sites/default/files/city-of-madison/mayor/documents/Pollinator%20Protection%20Task%20Force%20Report%20Final.pdf) — The Pollinator Protection Task Force compiled data and made recommendations in this report, utilizing resources such as the University of Wisconsin researchers, land use specialists, peer-reviewed scientific papers, and government reports. This report represents the City's divisions and departments that are most likely to be able to have a positive impact on pollinator populations. This can be a resource for other cities hoping to improve strategies to protect monarchs and other pollinators.
(<http://www.cityofmadison.com/sites/default/files/city-of-madison/mayor/documents/Pollinator Protection Task Force Report Final.pdf>)
- [Monarch Conservation in America's Cities](https://monarchjointventure.org/images/uploads/documents/Monarch-Conservation-in-Americas-Cities_Guide-121715.pdf) — This guide is intended for mayors, local government chief executives, municipal staff and others that want to take action to help save the declining monarch butterfly in their community. This guide provides case studies and shares innovative best practices that can be replicated by municipalities across the nation.
(https://monarchjointventure.org/images/uploads/documents/Monarch-Conservation-in-Americas-Cities_Guide-121715.pdf)
- [Pollinator Habitat Curriculum Guide](https://earthpartnership.wisc.edu/2018/06/20/new-pollinator-habitat-guide-from-earth-partnership-available-now-online) — This guide outlines the habitat restoration process from site analysis and design through seed propagation and restoration management. Lessons are designed for K-12 students but can be used by anyone as a resource to aid in planning and implementing a habitat restoration.
(<https://earthpartnership.wisc.edu/2018/06/20/new-pollinator-habitat-guide-from-earth-partnership-available-now-online>)