



PLANTING MILKWEED SEEDS

October 19, 2019 –

Uwchlan Township Environmental Advisory Council

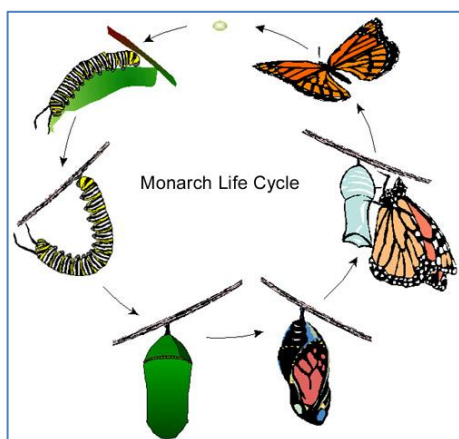
WHY PLANT MILKWEEDS?

Milkweeds are the host plants that feed the caterpillars of the monarch butterflies. They only eat milkweeds. Although the adult butterflies will take nectar from many blooming plants, the caterpillars of most butterflies and moths have evolved to eat only one or two particular plants. For example, the tiger swallowtail caterpillars only eat dill, fennel, or parsley. If we want these butterflies in our garden, we need to plant the plants the caterpillars will eat.

WHY DO WE WANT BUTTERFLIES IN OUR GARDEN?

Because they are beautiful, but also because they, like the many native bees, pollinate the flowers we grow – and thus the fruits and vegetables we harvest. And it takes many caterpillars to feed the birds.

Chickadee parents need to find 350 to 570 caterpillars every day, depending on the number of chicks. Multiply that by the 16 to 18 days it takes to fledge, and that's a total of 6,000 to 9,000 caterpillars to bring a clutch of chickadees to maturity.



MILKWEED SEEDS NEED “STRATIFICATION.” WHAT’S THAT?

Milkweed seeds, like the seeds of many native wildflowers, need “stratification,” or exposure to cold for a period of time, in order

to germinate. There are several ways to stratify the seeds; one common one is to hold them in your refrigerator for a couple of months. But the method using plastic jugs as “mini greenhouses” is easier and more successful.

KINDS OF MILKWEEDS

There are several species of milkweed that are easy to raise:

- Common Milkweed – *Asclepias syriaca*
- Pink Swamp Milkweed – *Asclepias incarnate*
- Butterfly Weed – *Asclepias tuberosa*
- Showy Milkweed – *Asclepias speciosa*

HOW TO PLANT IN JUGS

1. Use kitty litter jugs or gallon milk cartons. **Cut them in half, poke drainage and air holes** in the bottom and sides.
2. Fill the bottom part way with **moistened planting soil**.
3. **Put the seeds on top of the soil**, cover slightly with more soil. NOTE: Milkweed seeds do not like to be planted deep. If you are using this method for other wildflower seeds, sow the seeds appropriately, usually on the surface, or ¼” to ½” deep.
4. **Put the top back on the bottom**, overlapping slightly, and **tape them together**. Put the lid on.
5. **Mark the jug** so you know what and when you planted!



6. **Put the jug(s) outside where they are in the weather. And leave them!** Let it snow or rain on them. Let nature do its thing. Consider a spot that will have some sunshine in the spring.
7. Check them once in a while and rewater or mist if they are **drying out**.
8. In the spring, check them, and take the tops off **to uncover them, depending on the size of the seedlings**.
9. Optionally put the seedlings in peat pots to grow a bit larger. Then **plant them in your garden** and enjoy!
10. Save the jugs for next year – they recycle nicely!
11. And **try this method for other native plants**. It even works for other plants, like your veggies – just start sowing the seeds in the jugs in early spring. **Mini-greenhouses** to give your garden an early start!

OR PLANT MILKWEED SEEDS DIRECTLY IN THE GARDEN

In the fall, you can plant your seeds directly in your garden. Scatter the seeds where you want them to grow. Leave them on the surface or cover slightly. Milkweed seeds do not like to be planted deeply, they like the light.

DIVERSITY IN YOUR GARDEN

There are many other native plants you can incorporate into your garden, even alongside the landscape plants you already have, or to replace existing lawn. Native plants feed many butterflies and moths as well as other beneficial insects. They support a wider range of pollinators than non-native plants, including native bees that are important to pollination of our food plants. Berries on native plants feed birds preparing to migrate as well as those who stay the winter. A lot of cultivar and typically planted non-native plants have been modified to look pretty – but do not always provide pollen or nectar. And the pollen, nectar, and berries of native plants are often of a higher quality to support the insects and wildlife.

REFERENCES

Some Books of Interest

- **Bringing Nature Home**, by Douglas W. Tallamy (Timber Press, 2015),
- **Attracting Native Pollinators**, a Xerces Society Guide (Storey Publishing)
- **Butterfly Gardening with Native Plants**, by Christopher Kline (Skyhorse Publishing, 2015),
- **Attracting Birds, Butterflies, and other Backyard Wildlife (Expanded Second Edition 2019)**, National Wildlife Federation, David Jizejewski
- **10 Steps to Gardening With Nature**, Carole Ann Rollins and Elaine Ingham

Organizations and Websites

- **Audubon Society** - <https://www.audubon.org/native-plants> - Native Plants Database: search for native plants by your zip code
- **Valley Forge Audubon Society Backyards for Nature** program <http://valleyforgeaudubon.org/bfn/index.html> - list of recommended native plants, recommended books, provides guidance for creating healthy habitats for birds, butterflies, and other wildlife
- **Penn State Extension** - <http://extension.psu.edu/plants/gardening/eco-friendly>. Certify your pollinator-friendly garden with the Penn State Master Gardeners. PAPollinator@gmail.com or contact your local Penn State Extension office. Planting for Pollinators handout lists native perennials for sun, shade, etc. Also <https://extension.psu.edu/planting-pollinator-friendly-gardens>
- **National Wildlife Federation** (website at www.nwf.org)
- **Saveourmonarchs.org**
- www.MonarchWatch.org

Toni Gorkin tgorkin@gmail.com