

Sowing Milkweed Seeds Over the Winter Months

Monarch butterflies need the milkweed plant to survive. The Monarch caterpillars feed on the leaves of the milkweed. Without it, they cannot complete their life cycle and their populations decline.



Eradication of milkweed both in agricultural areas as well as in urban and suburban landscapes is one of the primary reasons that monarchs are in trouble today.

The good news is that planting milkweed is one of the easiest ways that each of us can make a difference for monarchs. There are several dozen species of this wildflower native to North America, so no matter where you live, there is at least one milkweed species naturally found in your area.

Planting local milkweed species is always best. You can collect your own seeds or purchase seeds or plants to add to your garden, or any landscape. Many local plant nurseries carry the milkweed plants for purchase. One can also buy milkweed seeds through plant catalogs or online stores such as eBay, Etsy, Amazon, and other merchants. Three species have particularly wide ranges and are good choices in most regions: common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*), swamp milkweed (*A. incarnata*), and butterfly weed (*A. tuberosa*).

Three Benefits of Winter Sowing Milkweed

1. Winter weather provides a natural cold stratification process. When seeds are subjected to cold before gradual warmth, this breaks their dormancy and causes them to sprout.
2. Seedlings sprout early inside their miniature greenhouses giving you a head start on the garden season and north-migrating monarch butterflies.
3. You have more control of where plants grow. If you direct sow in fall or spring, seeds can get moved around by weather or wildlife before they germinate.

There are various opinions on when to sow the milkweed seeds. Some gardeners sow their seeds in November. Some start sowing as early as the winter solstice (just before Christmas). However, starting seeds by February should be more than enough time (in most regions) to create the desired outcome.

I have the milkweed seeds ... now what should I do?

Supplies:

1. Any container that holds up to 4 inches of soil, with ample room for the seedlings to grow, will work. Keep in mind all containers must also be clear enough to allow light to penetrate the soil. It's not necessary to invest in expensive containers. One can use clear plastic storage bins with snap-on lids or recycle containers used for food storage. Examples: plastic milk containers, clear plastic cups, clear plastic baked good containers, 1- or 2-liter clear soda bottles, etc.

2. Use a good all-purpose potting soil, seed starting mix or make your own. Do not use a moisture-control variety, because excess moisture could lower germination rates for some milkweed species.
3. Duct tape, a scissors or box cutter, a marker for outdoor use, sturdy plant labels and a drill (or something to make drainage holes in your plastic containers).

Prepare the containers:

1. Rinse the containers
2. Label the containers. It's best to use a permanent marker that won't smudge or rinse away.
3. Drill or punch holes into the bottom of the containers. 4 to 8 holes should be sufficient.
4. Trace a line on the container at least 4" from the bottom of the container.
5. Cut the container. Cut three sides of the container, leaving one side as the hinge to open and close the container.
6. Add 4" of potting soil and do not forget to saturate the soil with water.
7. Plant the seeds. Lightly press each seed into the wet soil so it stays in place. Scatter a light coating of soil, ¼ inch, over the seeds.
8. Close the container. Secure the entire seam with duct tape. If the container is compromised your winter-sowed milkweed seeds will fail.
9. Set the container outside. Place in an area that receives a few hours of sun and where the containers will not be disturbed by animals or knocked over by wind. Leave the lids off the containers. Mother nature will water the seeds.

It's Spring!

1. Slightly dig containers into the soil where you want to plant to seedlings. You can use rocks to support the containers.
2. Water the plants from the bottom (the hole you dug) not through the opening of the container so the soil is not disturbed.
3. Cut off the duct tape and remove the container top. **Do this after the final frost date.**
4. Pinch off weak seedlings to prevent overcrowding of the plants.
5. Maintain proper watering of the container. Do not let the plants become too dry but do not over saturate the plants, either.
6. Remove the seedlings and plant in the garden. Be gentle when separating the plants as to not damage the roots.

Resources:

The National Wildlife Federation nwf.org/Garden-for-Wildlife/About/Native-Plants/Milkweed
Monarch Butterfly Garden monarchbutterflygarden.net/winter-sowing-milkweed-seeds



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