

Monarch Butterflies: The Kings and Queens of Summer

The return of warm weather heralds the return of Ontario's butterflies. While southern and eastern Ontario are home to over one hundred species of butterfly, the Monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*) is one of the most instantly recognizable butterflies. Adults are a brilliant orange and black with white spots and caterpillars are colourfully striped with black, white, and yellow. Their brilliant colours are where the name "Monarch" is believed to have come from. The butterflies were named in honour of King William III of England, whose secondary title was Prince of Orange.

The Monarch's bright and obvious colours are an example of aposematism – the use of warning colouration to scare away predators. Monarch caterpillars feed exclusively on milkweed which contains the toxin cardiac glycoside. The caterpillars store the toxin in their bodies and they become unpalatable to many potential predators.

In 2016, the Committee for the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) listed the Monarch butterfly as Endangered. For Monarchs, habitat loss and habitat fragmentation are key identified threat since throughout their life cycle, Monarchs use three different types of habitat! While the caterpillars are restricted to milkweed plants, the adults are nectar feeders and found anywhere wildflowers grow. As long-distance migrators, adults winter in Oyamel Fir forests in central Mexico. Monarchs face dire threats at every stage of their lives and their migration.

Now you Try:

As a concerned citizen of Ontario, you can do your part. It is as simple as making sure Monarchs have a safe summer refuge in Ontario by planting milkweed. Milkweed, as the name suggests, has been intentionally removed from much of its native habitat because it is classified as a weed. Ontario is home to eleven species of milkweed and many are quite attractive, with flowers in orange, pink, and white, and they can be grown as an attractive addition to a garden.

If you are concerned that milkweed will take over your garden, research which type is correct for your needs. Species like Common Milkweed can spread aggressively, and do so by underground rhizomes. By burying a barrier around the plant (at least 15 cm), you can contain its spread. For other species that spread by seed, snipping off the flowers before they can go to seed will halt their spread. With this simple and attractive garden addition, you can attract Monarchs to your garden and know that you are doing your part to help the survival of these summer beauties.

References:

- <https://www.ontario.ca/page/monarch>
- <https://cwf-fcf.org/en/resources/encyclopedias/flora/milkweed.html>
- <https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/services/species-risk-public-registry/cosewic-assessments-status-reports/monarch-2016.html>