

THE MONARCH BUTTERFLY

Danaus plexippus

Migration

In September and October huge numbers of monarchs migrate from the Central U.S. to a few locations near Mexico City. Along the way, they feed on the nectar of fall-blooming prairie and wetland plants like aster, goldenrod, bur marigold, ironweed, and blazingstar. Though monarch flight is slow and gliding, adult butterflies travel 1,500 miles (from St. Louis) to reach their over-wintering grounds in the forested mountains of southern Mexico. In spring they return, mating and laying eggs on milkweed plants as they fly north. Migrating Monarchs can live up to 9 months, but summer butterflies live only 6-10 weeks.

Got milkweed?

Milkweed plants are the the main food for monarch caterpillars.

Adult butterflies lay their eggs on milkweed leaves in spring and summer. Eggs hatch into larvae (caterpillars) which eat the leaves and absorb toxins which make them distasteful to birds. Gardeners are wise to grow several plants since larvae can eat all the leaves on a single plant.

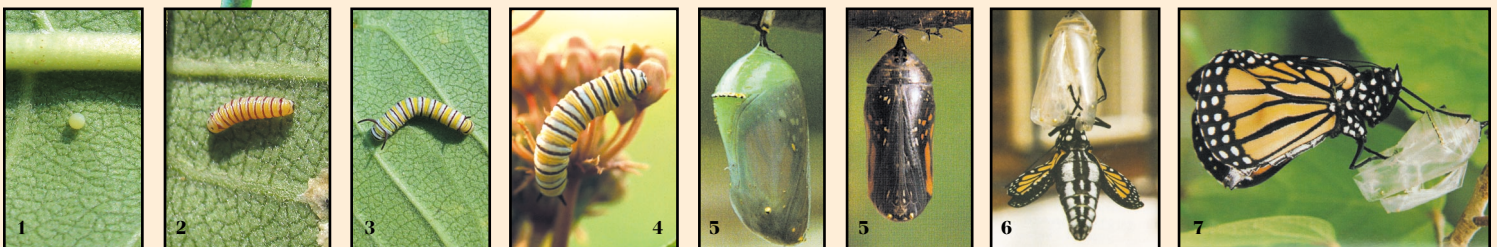
Life Cycle



Monarch caterpillars (larvae) feeding on swamp milkweed leaves.



(From top) Swamp milkweed, Purple milkweed, Butterfly milkweed, and Common milkweed.



1. Tiny cream-colored egg is laid singly on milkweed leaves; 2. Egg hatches into larva in four days; 3. The larva molts four times during a ten day period; 4. Mature larva (pupa) attaches itself under a leaf or stem; 5. Pupation lasts about 12 days; 6. Mature pupa (chrysalis) splits open and butterfly emerges; 7. Wings start out soft and small but expand and harden within an hour.