

## COLUMNISTS

# How to make your garden inviting to monarch butterflies

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Those of us fortunate enough to live in West Texas enjoy the striking displays of nature — such as brilliant sunsets and towering thunderheads. Many people, though, have missed a natural phenomenon each autumn when the eastern population of the monarch butterflies migrates to overwinter in the mountains of Mexico.

As the butterflies move southward from the northern United States and eastern Canada, they stop to rest along the way, forming “roosts” in trees where they rest and feed on nectar from nearby blooms. Abilene and the surrounding area are perfectly situated to host these amazing migrating butterflies. They then move on in their journey to Mexico, where they will gather in huge numbers in local fir trees for protection from the cold temperatures and wet weather.

The monarchs usually begin to appear in the Abilene area in early September, with the peak migration in October. The butterflies will arrive at a roosting location late in the day and begin to gather in the trees. On our farm they seem to prefer hackberries and mesquites, but many local roosts occur in oak and pecan trees also. They will clasp leaves or stems and cluster on the trees overnight.

In the morning’s cool temperature, the monarchs will bask in the sun, gently folding and opening their wings to warm to a temperature at which they can again take to the skies on their southward journey. It is an absolutely breathtaking experience to see the sky full of monarchs and to watch them gently drifting down into the trees to settle for the night, and then to watch them as they tentatively lift off into the sunshine in the morning.

Some roosts will be only a few butterflies, but they can easily number in the thousands if nectar sources are readily available for feeding.

Recent decreases in monarch populations may affect the migration numbers, and even cause it to disappear. There are several steps that we can all take to ensure that the journey for the monarchs continues to be successful. Because so much of the monarch's natural habitat has been lost, there is a need to increase favorable plantings in our yards and in large open areas.

Monarchs are one of many butterflies and moths whose caterpillars have a specific host plant — milkweed. There are many different varieties of milkweed in Taylor County which are used for egg laying and caterpillar food. Protecting existing milkweed or planting several plants in your flower areas can mean survival for tiny caterpillars.

Adult monarchs depend on nectar produced by flowers for their total food intake, so it is critical for them to have adequate blooming plants when they come through our area. Their migration may be as much as 3,000 miles, and the tiny butterfly must replenish its body as it stops to rest and feed.

The final caution in providing for our monarchs is to be sure no pesticides are present in your blooming plants. Both caterpillars and adults are killed by pesticides, even if they are organic.

There are good sources of additional information online about monarchs and their migration:

- ▶ The website [journeynorth.org](http://journeynorth.org) was designed for educators to use with students. There is an excellent map of sightings which show the location of the migrating monarchs. They also have good general information about monarchs.
- ▶ The University of Kansas manages the website [monarchwatch.org](http://monarchwatch.org), which is more oriented to adult readership. It has very detailed information on many aspects of monarch butterflies. The university also manages the tagging program for monarch research in which several Abilene area citizen scientists participate.
- ▶ A local information source is the Big Country Master Naturalist group, which can be contacted through AgriLife Extension Service at 325-672-6048. Members have been involved in many training experiences and citizen science efforts. They are happy to share information about both the monarchs and their migration.

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