



Starting Milkweed from Seed

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The Monarch Butterfly is identified as an at-risk species in Ontario. A variety of factors, including habitat loss, has placed pressure on the Monarch Butterfly. Nectar corridors help. These small patches of nectar sources in urban landscapes act as fuelling stations for the Monarch Butterfly at different stages of its life cycle.

Milkweed is a host plant for the Monarch. It also provides food during the caterpillar stage as well as hosting its eggs. Other nectar plants are needed, particularly in Fall, such as New England Aster (*Symphyotrichum novae-angliae*).

Types of Milkweed

There are a variety of milkweed species; some are better suited for home gardens.

- **Common milkweed** (*Asclepias syriaca*) – Commonly found in fields and meadows, this variety is aggressive. It spreads by rhizomes and underground roots. It has large rounded pink flowers and it is a favorite of pollinators.
- **Butterflyweed** (*Asclepias tuberosa*) – This variety is a favorite of gardeners and pollinators. It forms clumps of plants about 2 feet tall and 3 feet wide and looks lovely in borders. Butterflyweed has bright orange, flat topped blooms.



- **Swamp milkweed** (*Asclepias incarnata*) – This variety has lovely pink flowers. It can be grown in average garden soil in full sun. Swamp milkweed is larger than Butterflyweed. It grows up to 4 feet tall and 3 feet wide.

Planting Milkweed Seeds

Autumn Seed Planting - Late autumn is a great time to directly plant milkweed seeds outdoors. Sowing seeds at this time of year mimics nature's stratification process (cold wet treatment for 30 days). After the first frost, scatter the seeds on prepared (weed free) soil about one inch apart and cover with a quarter inch of soil. Water well. Be sure to mark where you have planted. Seeds can be sown until the ground freezes.

Some seeds may wash away during the autumn or winter. In spring, you will need to thin the seedlings. This method is cost effective, requiring no trays or potting soil.

Winter Seed Sowing - Starting in late December through to early February, seeds can be started in plastic containers with lids, soda bottles or clear plastic jugs. Approximately three inches of moist potting soil is placed at the bottom of a plastic container and venting holes are made. If using bottles, leave the caps off. After planting the seeds, the container is closed, or in the case of jugs and bottles, the cut opening is taped. Then this mini-greenhouse is placed in a location that will receive sun and moisture. Seedlings can be thinned and planted out in spring.

This method allows seeds to be stratified outdoors and uses recycled materials. You do need to monitor if there is a sudden temperature swing, causing sudden seed germination and temperatures warm enough to "cook" the seedlings.

Seed Sowing in Spring – This method requires indoor stratification or cold treatment of the seeds before they will germinate. Once seeds receive a 30-day cold treatment, they can be started indoors in trays, or directly sown outdoors in spring.

In late winter, begin to stratify your seeds in the refrigerator. They'll need a minimum of 30 days of cold temperatures. Rinse the seeds and place in a dampened paper towel and then insert into a zip locking bag. Monitor moisture levels. Replace the paper towel if it dries out. Check for any signs of rot and dispose of those seeds. Be sure to label the baggie with the date and seed name.



Once the seeds are stratified, the milkweed seeds can be planted outdoors in spring. For indoors, seeds should be started in a tray with moistened seed starting mix and covered with a plastic dome or plastic wrap. After 7 to 14 days, the seeds should sprout and then can be placed uncovered under a grow light or in a sunny location. This method does require more planning and equipment, but you can control growing conditions.

For more information: <https://savvygardening.com/planting-milkweed-seeds/>

<https://growitbuildit.com/illustrated-guide-to-winter-sowing-with-pictures/>