

Asclepias sp.

Milkweed, once merely thought of as a plant suited to roadside ditches has become the best-selling plant at many nurseries, including ours.

Many butterfly enthusiasts plant [milkweed](#) to help support monarch caterpillars that need milkweed to survive to adulthood.

However, research in the last decade has led scientists to believe that tropical milkweed (*Asclepias curassavica*) does more harm than good for the Monarch butterfly, which is currently on the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's Federally Endangered List.

Tropical Milkweed

When tropical milkweed is not cut back annually, a deadly parasite, *Ophryocystis elektroscirrha* (OE) is likely to persist in the environment and cause further decline to the monarch population.

Additionally, in Central Florida, tropical milkweed does not go dormant naturally. This encouraged overwintering of the Monarch butterfly which disrupts their natural migration. This is detrimental to the Monarch as they die in low temperatures.

Furthermore, tropical milkweed is invading natural habitat and outcompeting native milkweed and other native plants that are far more beneficial to wildlife. Unfortunately, it's impossible to maintain these plants in the wild by cutting them back, so they persist.

As a result, Rockledge Gardens has decided to no longer sell tropical milkweed.

Many of us currently already have this planted in our yards. It is recommended that you remove tropical milkweed in exchange for Florida native species.

Florida Native Milkweed

If you have the option, plant native milkweed! It will die back during the colder months, encouraging Monarchs to migrate to Mexico

Don't worry, Native milkweed are perennials, and will come back in the spring once the temperatures are warm enough for Monarch survival.

Milkweed also reseeds itself so, if left the space, new plants will pop up too.

Asclepias perennis

Also known as Swamp Milkweed, this native Monarch food has white, showy blooms. As the name suggests, Swamp Milkweed does best with a bit more moisture than other milkweeds. These can also take a little more shade and stand no taller than 2 feet.

Asclepias tuberosa

Another native option that has orange blooms and likes lots of sun. Topping out at about 2 feet, this species provides interesting foliage that is thinner than *Asclepias incarnata*. Don't mistake this species for it's tropical look alike! Many big box stores misidentify tropical milkweed as *Asclepias tuberosa*.

Asclepias incarnata

The largest of the 3 native species named here, this milkweed has beautifully delicate pink and white blooms. This pink milkweed can get up to 6 feet if you let it (or your Monarch caterpillars allow), but can be cut back to stay at essentially any height desired. Full sun to part shade is best!

Insects on Milkweed

Most insects found on milkweed can be left alone to do their thing. They prefer to eat the toxin found in milkweed rather than anything else in your garden. However, many can outcompete caterpillars who need a little extra help these days. Best practices for removing unwanted insects are hand-removal and encouraging natural enemies by avoiding pesticides in your landscape and increasing the biodiversity in your yard by planting native plants.

Butterflies and Moths

We are all familiar with the Monarch, but milkweed is also a host to other caterpillars including the beautiful Tussock and Cynia moths.

Milkweed Aphids

Milkweed aphids are usually the first insects to show up on milkweed. There are over 4,000 species of aphids, but the milkweed aphid happily stays put on milkweed plants.

Milkweed Bugs (small and large)

Milkweed bugs also reside on milkweed most of the year. The adults have wings, whereas the younger juveniles are often bright orange and lack the power of flight. They can overpower other insects on the plant, so keeping their population in check is advised.

Milkweed Beetle

While not as common in Florida, occasionally, the swamp milkweed leaf beetle (*Labidomera clivicollis*) can be found on our native swamp milkweed. These prolific feeders can easily out-compete caterpillars.

Avoid using pesticides and simply hand pick and toss pests into a bucket of soapy water. Or, just plant more milkweed! With so many interesting native varieties, why not add to the biodiversity of your yard and help our local monarch population.

Ladybugs

Soon enough, ladybugs will show up to happily snack on excess aphids on your milkweed plants.

What Else Can You Do to Support Monarchs?

Become a Citizen Scientist- Become a monarch advocate by participating in monarch tagging and OE testing in your community. Monarch watch can supply you or your group with official monarch tags to help assess the numbers of butterflies completing their journey (www.monarchwatch.org).

If you are interested in contributing to the data available on OE infection, we have a limited number of test kits available that can be used next spring when the monarchs are back in town. Kits are also

available through the monarch parasite website (www.monarchparasites.org).

Make Your Yard a Monarch Station- Bring attention to both the monarchs and your beautiful yard by applying to be a monarch waystation. In order to be approved, you must have a healthy supply of both [nectar and host plants](#) as well as a commitment to using [natives](#) when possible. Signs and information are available at www.monarchwatch.org

