

Raising Monarch Butterflies

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Watch the powerful and magical changes in a butterfly's life cycle.



monarch egg

FIND AN EGG

During the summer, sometimes as early as May, you will begin to see monarchs in wild places, parks, and even yards and alleys where there are milkweed plants. Watch monarchs as they flit around a field. If one lands on a milkweed leaf and stays

Milkweeds have milky juice.

for a time she is probably laying an egg, which you can find on the underside of the leaf. Cut the plant and put it in water to keep it fresh. Keep it indoors to prevent predation and put it near a window to mimic outdoor conditions as closely as possible. The egg should hatch in about two days.

MATERIALS

- Commercial size, wide-mouthed pickle jar.
- Piece of netting and rubber band for lid
- Small pill or film container to hold the water for the food plant
- Piece of clay to hold the water container to the bottom of the pickle jar
- Small stick with branches for the chrysalis

FEED THE HUNGRY CATERPILLAR

The tip of the egg will turn black just before hatching. The very small caterpillar will eat the eggshell as it emerges. If the plant is still fresh, put it in a small container of water, then put this into a large, wide-mouthed pickle jar. Cover the jar with a piece of netting (not the lid, as that will hold in too much moisture). Keep fresh milkweed available at all times to minimize wandering. Handle the caterpillar as little as possible. When it is small, transfer it to a fresh leaf by cutting a piece of leaf off with the caterpillar on it and laying it on the fresh leaves. The caterpillar will shed its skin several times as it grows. When it does, it will sit quietly, not eating for a time.

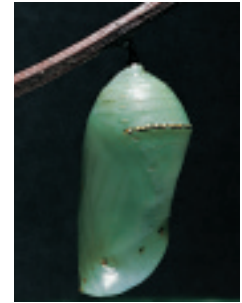


WATCH CAREFULLY

After 10–14 days the caterpillar will become restless and wander, looking for a suitable place to become a chrysalis. Put a stick with branches into the jar to offer a possible place for it to attach. It does this by spinning a mat of silk and then hanging down to form a ‘J’ shape. After it has been in the ‘J’ for 6–12 hours, it will slowly shrink out of its skin, and with a sudden whirling motion, throw it off and emerge as a chrysalis.

WAIT AND WONDER


The caterpillar may have attached itself to the milkweed. If the milkweed withers and becomes too weak, then carefully attach the chrysalis to the netting with a straight pin. After another 10–14 days, the chrysalis darkens and the pattern of the butterfly’s wings shows through the translucent shell. The monarch will gently emerge from its chrysalis. It takes several hours for the butterfly to straighten and dry its wings. Then it is ready to return to nature. If your child is reluctant to let it go, make a ceremony of it and thank the butterfly as you let it go.





PHOTOS: ROBERT KUČERA




Other activities:

 Visit a native prairie or savanna on a late July mid-morning. Find a spot full of butterflies and watch them drink nectar with their amazing long tongues. The great spangled fritillary, which is fairly common in prairies, has a lazy way of laying across a flower and slowly pulsating its wings as it drinks. When you see this, you'll know you've reached the absolute heart of summer. Enjoy!

 Look on a milkweed for a milkweed beetle. It has the same colors and toxins as a monarch.

 Invite moths to your backyard with imitation “nectar.” Have your child mash a banana in a bowl with a fork. Mix in 4 T. sugar. Slowly add 1 cup of fruit juice and mix thoroughly. Refrigerate the mixture until dusk, then “paint” it onto a tree with a paintbrush. Later in the night, visit the tree with a flashlight. The fruit mix smells and tastes like flower nectar, which butterflies and moths love!

 Plant a butterfly garden. Offer lots of types of native plants and avoid pesticides. Caterpillars often eat different plants than butterflies, so do a little research before getting started.

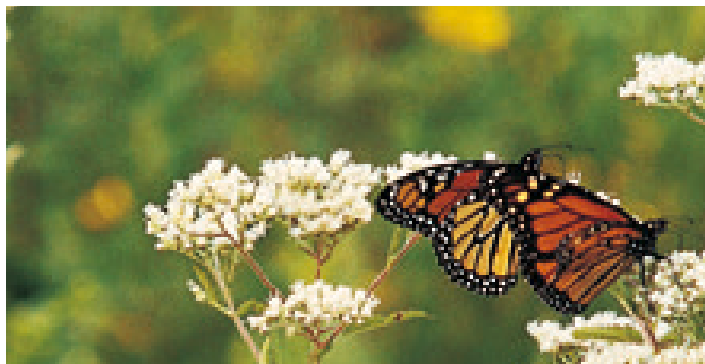


PHOTO: BARRY L. WHITE

Did you know? Monarchs eat milkweed, which has a substance that is poison for many animals. Consequently, monarchs become toxic prey and their bright orange colors warn potential predators, “Beware! Poison!” Some of our rarer milkweed species have more powerful toxin than the common one that we find in vacant lots and alleys. Many monarchs now have less protection from their predators because, as our wild areas shrink and become degraded, monarchs don't have as much high-powered toxin available to them.



Compare the drawing of the Viceroy butterfly above with the photo to the left. It looks very much like a monarch. Usually it is smaller and is almost always found in wetlands. Look for a horizontal line across the hindwings of the Viceroy that is not present on monarchs.