



How to Raise a Monarch Butterfly

In Wisconsin and east of the Rocky Mountains, we have the unique opportunity to raise migrating Western monarch butterflies. Butterflies emerging in late August and September will likely make the 1,500-mile journey to overwinter in Mexico. You can play a role in the survival of the Monarch butterfly. This guide will give you the basics to get you started in raising a monarch from egg to butterfly.

What do I need to raise a monarch?

Raising a monarch is a fun experience for the entire family. You'll need the following supplies:

- Milkweed Plant Leaves
- Ziploc bags for leaves
- Container or habitat
- Small sheets of white paper towel

1. Milkweed. Locate chemical free healthy milkweed plants. In Wisconsin you'll find Common and Swamp Milkweed (*asclepias syriaca* & *asclepias incarnate*) plants. If you pick milkweed in the wild stay away from residential areas, farms and parks where they may spray herbicides or pesticides that could contaminate the milkweed. Pick leaves, then dab milk sap from the stem on a paper towel. You can cut larger leaves into smaller pieces. Store leaves in a Ziploc bag in the refrigerator. Remember milkweed is toxic. *Do not get milkweed sap in your eyes or on your skin.* It will burn and can cause temporary blindness or a rash. Wear gloves when picking milkweed and wash your hands.



2. A habitat. Some use aquariums or mesh habitats. One method is to use medium size plastic food containers with nylon footies as a lid. Some use mesh fabric/screen held on with rubber bands. Keep the container in a cool place away from direct sunlight.
3. Paper towel can be used on the bottom of the habitat to collect the caterpillar poop called frass. Clean the container daily unless the caterpillar is molting or in the "J" position.



How do I find a monarch egg or caterpillar?

*Monarch caterpillar eggs.
Circled in blue is about to hatch!*

Monarch eggs or caterpillars are only found on milkweed. Eggs are very small white dots that come to a slight point at the top. Typically, there are only one or two on a leaf. Look on the underside of the leaves of younger, smaller milkweed plants.

Female monarchs seek out these young plants because the tender leaves are easier for babies to eat.

I found an egg! Now what?



Take the whole leaf that the egg is on and place it on a slightly damp white paper towel in a plastic food container with a lid. Tiny newborn caterpillars are the size of a piece of rice and not ready for a mesh container until 5 days old. Open the container daily, lift the leaf and spritz the paper towel helping the leaf stay fresh until your egg hatches. In 3-5 days, when your egg is about to hatch the top will turn black. That is the head! Eating the egg shell will be his first meal.

Monarch Caterpillar Stages

Your caterpillar will grow about 2,000 times his original size in just about two weeks! As he gets bigger and bigger, he is going to molt. Molting is where the caterpillar sheds his skin, kind of like a snake. He will actually walk right out of it. He may also turn around and eat his molt.

Each time your caterpillar prepares to molt he will often leave his leaf or stay put and be very still for many hours, sometimes a full day. Don't worry! He's just concentrating on this big task. Do not disturb him. After his molt he will be back to munching on his leaf in no time. Make sure to wash your hands before and after feeding and cleaning.

Feeding A Monarch Caterpillar

Never touch a caterpillar. Instead lift the leaf with the caterpillar on it, remove old leaves, and put a new leaf on the bottom then put the leaf with the caterpillar back on top. Make sure he always has fresh food. As you replace/add leaves, change out the paper towel at the bottom to keep the container clean. Do not disturb the container if your caterpillar is hanging out on the lid or side. Wait until he starts moving again to open the container. You never want to chance interrupting a molt as this could cause death.



Closer to Butterfly

Once your caterpillar is full size, about two inches long, at some point he will head to the top of his container. He will stop eating and will stay on the top for about 24 hours building his silk mat. He will use this silk to then hang upside down in what is called a "J" position. Do not disturb. Just watch!



Be sure he is in a place where no one will knock the container. Once he goes into his "J" position, within 24 hours he will turn into a chrysalis (pupate). After 24-36 hours the chrysalis will harden and it is safe to open and clean out the bottom of the habitat.



The chrysalis will need to be moved if there is less than 3 inches for the wings to expand when emerging. An all-mesh laundry hamper, with zipper sides has plenty of room. The chrysalis is attached to the top by a silky thread mat. You can remove the footie or mesh fabric and pin it to the top of the mesh container. Be careful not to pull the chrysalis away from the silky pad mat.



After 8-14 days, when the jade, green chrysalis changes color to dark black that is a sign that soon the butterfly will emerge.

When your butterfly emerges, he will need to **hang** for 4-6 hours undisturbed as his wings straighten and dry out. This is critical so he can fly. It is rare, but possible, your new butterfly falls as he emerges. You will need to help your butterfly, by using a stick that the butterfly legs can climb on and lift him back to the top to hang.

It is normal for the butterfly to drip a few drops of rust colored liquid during the drying process. After 4-6 hours, the butterfly will flutter giving you a sign to release the butterfly outside. Use a stick or your finger to gently lift the butterfly out of the container, and don't touch the wings. Avoid releasing your butterfly if it is raining or at night. If your butterfly wing matches the front picture, it is a female. Males have black wing spots on their lower wings.

Congratulations on your first monarch!

Resources

Monarchwatch.org [www.https://journeynorth.org/monarchs](https://journeynorth.org/monarchs)

[www.https://monarchjointventure.org](https://monarchjointventure.org) (University of Minnesota)

Facebook Group *Monarch Madness in Wisconsin*

CONTACT US:

Washington County Master Gardeners

wcmastergardeners.com

www.facebook.com/wcwimastergardeners

