

# Q&A with a master gardener: Caring for Monarch butterflies

When we were raising our caterpillars and waiting for them to become butterflies, I accidentally identified them as Monarch caterpillars. They were, in fact, Painted Ladies.

The first person to point out my mistake was Chris Drees, a master gardener who wrote to tell me that our caterpillars didn't look like Monarchs. She would know. She raises Monarchs in Orange County, Calif.

As we exchanged emails, I realized how interesting it could be to learn about Monarch butterflies. I asked her to answer a few questions about her work for Monarchs, and she was so generous with her time. She sent me her replies as well as these beautiful photos.



## **How and when did you get involved in raising Monarchs?**

A couple of years ago a fellow master gardener reached out to the membership asking if anyone wanted to help her with the abundance of Monarch caterpillars she had in her yard. I thought it would be a fun project so volunteered to take a few home with me. From there they multiplied and I was hooked.

## **Why do you do it?**

I started doing it simply because I thought all butterflies and particularly Monarchs were so beautiful and I wanted some fluttering in my backyard. After doing some research, it became apparent to me that beyond being beautiful, they need the help of all of us to survive. It is fulfilling to know that even in a very small way, I am helping to increase the dramatically declining number of Monarchs.

## **What are some of the challenges Monarchs face today?**

There are more challenges facing Monarchs that I ever imagined. They can contract a number of infections—a protozoan parasite known as O.E. is particularly prevalent—but one of the greatest challenges is the loss of habitat due to the eradication of milkweed through the use of pesticides (the only plant on which Monarchs will lay eggs and which caterpillars will eat) and the illegal logging in Mexico where Monarchs migrate to each winter. There is considerable debate and controversy over the impact the use of certain pesticides has on the Monarch population and it is worth researching to learn more about this subject if one has the time and

interest in protecting all the creatures on our planet including us humans.



### **What can we do to help the Monarchs?**

Everyone can do just a little to increase the declining numbers and help save this magnificent being. It is as simple as planting milkweed in your backyard so Monarchs can lay their eggs and feed the caterpillars and to have nectar plants for the emerging butterflies to feed upon. For enthusiasts such as myself, one can collect the eggs from the plants to keep them from natural predators, keeping them in enclosures and releasing them when finally they emerge as butterflies. There are numerous sites on the web that discuss the do's and don'ts of becoming involved.

### **Is caring for the caterpillars a big commitment?**

It depends upon the level of commitment one wants to make. As I mentioned, it can simply be planting the milkweed and letting nature take its course. If raising them, it does take the commitment to ensure they have enough food and that whatever habitat is used to contain them is kept clean and sanitary.



### **How many do you care for at a time?**

That depends upon how many Monarchs are fluttering around my yard and laying eggs on the milkweed. Recently I was caring for about 25 caterpillars and waiting for about another 25 eggs to hatch. Usually I have a "batch" of Monarchs in the egg stage, another batch in the caterpillar stage, and then still another in chrysalis. Then along come more Monarchs in the yard, fluttering about and laying more eggs, so it's an ongoing process.

### **Where you live, can you release them year-round?**

In Southern California where the climate is warm they can be released year-round. I have found, however that I see a very few, if any, during the winter months. I see them again in my yard in the spring. I have friends who do see them all year.

### **What advice would you offer someone who wanted to get involved in raising Monarchs?**

I would advise doing the research to learn about the life cycle of Monarchs, their needs during their life stages, the health challenges they face and how to avoid or minimize the various unfortunate viruses and parasites they can encounter along the way. One wonderful resource in learning more about Monarchs is [monarchwatch.org](http://monarchwatch.org), but there are also many other resources available.

## **What has been most surprising to you about caring for the Monarchs?**

How much the Monarch caterpillar can eat! Shortly before they are ready to go into the chrysalis phase, one Monarch caterpillar can strip an entire milkweed plant in no time! The plants regrow fairly quickly but I also find myself running to the nursery for more plants. Which reminds me to mention that when one buys milkweed, they should ask the nursery about their policy in the use of pesticides on their milkweed.

## **How many do you think you have raised?**

I honestly have not kept count. Over a hundred easily.



## **Do you have a background in biology or ecology?**

No background in either. I have educated myself in the subject because it is one for which I reap great rewards when seeing each emerging butterfly take flight and in knowing that in a very small way, I am making a difference. I still do lots of research and learn more with each “crop” of Monarchs I raise.

## **Do you ever care for other butterflies?**

So far I have not been able to attract other butterflies in my yard even though I have planted nectar flowers specific to certain types of butterflies. I see an occasional Mourning Cloak, Painted Lady, or Sulfur but they are just passing through. A friend gave me a few Swallowtail caterpillars. They went into chrysalis but never made it to the butterfly stage. I don’t know why. Giant Swallowtail caterpillars are some of the ugliest creatures you’ll ever see but oh, what magnificent butterflies they become!

I’m not sure why more are not coming but I will keep trying. My main focus, however, is the Monarchs as they are specifically threatened. In the past 20 years, the population of Monarch butterflies has decreased by 90 percent. The government is making attempts to help with the survival not only of Monarchs but bees and other pollinators but we can all join in and do our part to make a difference and ensure their future.