

The Monarch Flower Partnership

Increasing the Availability of Milkweed Seed for Monarch Habitat

Our goal is to increase planting of milkweeds in California, the Great Basin, the Southwest, Texas, and Florida.

Milkweeds are essential for monarchs to reproduce.

We are developing regional sources of local species and promoting their use in habitat restoration.

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The Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation

www.xerces.org



Photograph: John Anderson, Hedgerow Farms

Local species of milkweeds are key to the future success of monarch populations—and will support many other species.

In 2008 the Commission for Environmental Cooperation, a treaty organization between the United States, Canada, and Mexico established by the North American Free Trade Agreement, published the North American Monarch Conservation Plan. The plan addressed the steady decline of monarch butterflies across their native range since population monitoring first began in 1976.

Multiple reasons for the decline in monarchs are noted in the plan, but habitat loss is identified as the single largest threat. Because of their migratory life cycle—breeding in the United States and Canada, and overwintering at only a few locations in Mexico and California—the most effective conservation strategies

for monarch butterflies are those that protect and restore habitat across their entire range.

Milkweeds (*Asclepias* spp.) play a critical role in the monarch life cycle. Each spring monarchs move across the United States, laying eggs on native milkweeds, the only plants that serve as food for newly hatched monarch caterpillars. Intensifying agriculture, development of rural lands, and the use of mowing and herbicides to control roadside vegetation have all contributed to a reduced abundance of milkweeds in the landscape. As a result, the North American Monarch Conservation Plan recommends planting native milkweed species to restore habitat within the monarch butterfly's breeding range.

Our goal: Increase the planting of native milkweeds in key regions of the country.

The Xerces Society is working to increase the availability of native milkweed seed and encourage restoration using milkweed in California, the Great Basin, the Southwest, Texas, and Florida. These are important areas of the monarch's spring and summer

breeding range where few commercial sources of native milkweed seed currently exist. To conduct the project, we are partnering with the Monarch Joint Venture, a coalition of federal and state agencies, scientists, and nonprofit conservation organizations.

Our Strategies for Increasing Native Milkweed Seed Availability

1 Produce sources of milkweed seed native to each region.

We are working with local partners in each region to produce reliable sources of regionally appropriate native milkweed seed. Working with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and native seed producers, we are conducting field trials, identifying production challenges, and establishing seed production techniques. This information will be used to develop propagation guidelines for each species.

2 Provide information on growing native milkweeds.

We are working to develop printed guidelines and an online directory of information on using milkweed in habitat restoration projects. These will enable conservation agencies and landowners to identify the appropriate native milkweed species for their region, help address weed concerns, and emphasize the ecological role of milkweeds for monarchs and other pollinators.

3 Promote the use of milkweeds to restore habitat for wildlife.

We are incorporating information on native milkweeds into the dozens of workshops and trainings we conduct each year for farmers and land managers interested in creating habitat for pollinators and other wildlife. Milkweeds benefit an array of pollinators and provide another tool for conserving habitat on working farms and ranches.

4 Build new markets within the native seed industry.

We are working to expand markets for native plant nurseries to ensure long-term profitability of milkweed crops. To do this, we currently recommend the inclusion of milkweed seed in all pollinator seed mixes, where appropriate, for the restoration and re-vegetation projects across the country on which we regularly provide consultation. We will create an online directory of all known milkweed seed producers in the United States to help connect purchasers of milkweed seed to suppliers in their region.

Partnership for Monarchs

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Photograph: John Anderson, Hedgerow Farms

Harvesting narrow-leaved milkweed seed at Hedgerow Farms in Winters, California.