

## **Butterflies need us---Now!**

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Did you know that since the movie *Titanic* debuted in 1997, worldwide populations of Monarch Butterflies have declined 90 percent? What is the connection between the two? Absolutely zero, but it shows how much can change in just 20 years! Things are very grave in 2017 for Monarchs and all butterflies.

Aside from being lovely to look at, why are butterflies important? Butterflies are important pollinators-- they help plants reproduce by spreading around the pollen that adheres to their bodies as they feed on nectar. After bees/wasps and flies, butterflies (and moths) are the third most prolific pollinators. In addition, butterflies play a major role in the food chain- they are a source of food for small animals like birds and bats, which in turn help control pests (like mosquitos) in our environment.

Butterflies are also considered by scientists to be an important “indicator species.” They are so sensitive to chemicals and pollutants, that their presence in an environment indicates that a wide range of invertebrates necessary for a healthy ecosystem are there too. In this way, butterflies let us know if our surroundings are healthy--- not just for other insects, birds and animals to inhabit, but healthy for humans to live in as well.

What can **we** do to help boost the population of butterflies? Here are some easy, steps you can take to help these important insects thrive in your own backyard!

**1. Don't use pesticides anywhere on your property.** Butterflies are insects. Common insecticides that gardeners use on lawns **kill butterflies** (and bees! In fact the insecticide, Round Up, is so strong that it can also kill songbirds). Also, skip the herbicide and use non-toxic weed control methods that won't harm wildlife--- try using horticultural oils for the weeds and beneficial insects like ladybugs and nematodes to gobble up the insects you don't want. Eat organic whenever you can.

**2. Plant milkweed (and other “host plants”).** Milkweed is a “host plant” for Monarch Butterflies-- in other words, it is the *only* plant that a Monarch Butterfly will lay its eggs on and the *only* plant that Monarch caterpillars will eat. The World Wildlife Fund and other organizations blame much of the drastic decline of the Monarch Butterfly population on the disappearance of milkweed plants that has occurred with the expansion of genetically modified crops and the heavy use of pesticides and herbicides.

You can help encourage the survival of Monarch Butterflies by planting milkweed in your garden, and by planting native host plants that other butterflies depend on, such as: birch, ash, oak and tulip trees, false indigo, sunflowers, violets, switch grass and sedge.

**3. Plant butterfly “food.”** These are native shrubs and trees like rhododendron, viburnum, and spicebush, and perennials like like catmint, asters, phlox, purple coneflowers, black-eyed susans, goldenrod and Joe Pye Weed, that provide the nectar-filled flowers on which butterflies feed.

**4. Give them water.** Although tree sap, nectar and dew give butterflies most of the moisture they need, water in shallow dishes will help them to be even healthier. To create “puddling stations,” fill a shallow plant saucer (or pie tin) with some sand or gravel. Bury the dish to its lip in the soil in your garden, preferably near some butterfly-loving plants. Fill the dish with water, and replenish it as needed (daily when the weather gets hot). You can place some overripe fruit and a pinch of natural sea salt in the dish weekly to give the butterflies additional minerals.

**5. Leave some part of your yard “wild.”** Dead trees and branches, piles of leaves, tangled vines-- all of these “messy” elements provide shelter from the wind and rain for butterflies. If you keep the edges of your property a bit wild and messy, perhaps hidden by shrubs, you will benefit butterflies, birds and other wild creatures by providing the coverage which they need to survive.

*For more information on butterflies, see: [onegreenplanet.org](http://onegreenplanet.org), [nwf.org](http://nwf.org), [livemonarch.org](http://livemonarch.org), and [NYBG.org](http://NYBG.org).*