During spring and summer, monarchs breed throughout the United States and southern Canada. In the fall, adults of an eastern population migrate to Mexico, flying up to 3,000 miles. In the western U.S., monarchs may overwinter in the mountains, and a few individuals may fly as far as the Hawaiian Islands. Monarch butterflies leave their overwintering sites and fly northwest in search of host plants on which to lay their eggs. Female monarchs lay eggs on milkweeds and a few other plants in the milkweed family. As monarchs spread across North America, several generations of butterflies are produced. In Florida, some non-migratory individuals remain and breed year-round.

Sadly, population monitoring at overwintering sites in Mexico and California has documented a steady decline. Monarch butterflies are threatened by loss and degradation of habitat, natural disease and predation, adverse weather and the ongoing decline of native milkweeds. Because of the monarch’s migratory lifecycle, effective conservation strategies need to protect and restore habitat across their entire range.

In addition to providing a food source for monarch larvae, the showy flowers of milkweeds offer abundant, high quality nectar to many pollinators including bees, butterflies and hummingbirds. The handsome plants can also add interest and beauty to any landscape. Milkweeds are named for their milky latex sap, which contains alkaloids and cardenolides, complex chemicals that make the plants unpalatable to most animals. Milkweeds have fleshy, pod-like fruits that split when mature, releasing seeds. Each milkweed seed is attached to fuffy hairs, known as pappus, silk, or fluff, that aid in wind dispersal.

Intensifying agriculture, development of rural lands and the use of mowing and herbicides to control vegetation have all reduced the abundance of naturally occurring milkweeds. This has resulted in a substantial loss of critical resources available for monarchs throughout much of the eastern United States. As a result, the North American Monarch Conservation Plan recommends planting native milkweed species to help restore breeding habitat. Sites of any size or location can help, from urban parks, schools and home gardens to commercial developments, municipalities and rural roadsides.

While native milkweeds are crucial for monarchs, commercial sources of plants and seeds remain limited. The Florida Museum of Natural History, the Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation, Butterflies Conservation Initiative and the Monarch Joint Venture are working to help raise awareness and produce reliable sources of native milkweed. Inventory is expected to increase steadily over the next several years, to meet demand for home gardens and habitat restoration projects across the region.

Ask for native milkweeds at your local retail garden center! Be sure to ask for plants that have not been treated with pesticides, which may make them toxic to monarchs and other insects.
This educational resource was developed by the Florida Museum of Natural History in cooperation with the U.S. Forest Service (www.fs.fed.us), Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation (www.xerces.org) and Butterfly Conservation Initiative (www.butterflyrecovery.com).