

# Sonoran Desert Pollinator Plant Guide

*How to attract pollinators  
to your yard!*



City of Phoenix



# Introduction

**Did you know** that the monarch butterfly population is struggling? The western population of this butterfly has declined by more than 90% since the late 1990s due to stressors such as urban development, pesticide use, and climate change. Arizona is an important part of the monarch's migratory path each Fall and Spring – a journey of about 3,000 miles! In 2021, the City of Phoenix joined a nationwide movement to support the monarch butterfly population through the National Wildlife Federation's Mayor's Monarch Pledge. So how can we all help? Native nectar-producing plants, especially milkweed, are crucial to the survival of not just the monarch butterfly, but many other important pollinators as well. When we help the monarch's migration by planting native milkweed and other native nectar plants, we help many other pollinators as well!



## Why does this matter?

Pollinators play a crucial role in maintaining a thriving ecosystem. A healthy ecosystem enhances our water quality and food production, beautifies our surroundings, and helps regulate local temperatures.

## How can you help?

Plant native milkweed and other native nectar plants! This plant guide shows a few of these native plants that you can use to beautify your yard and create habitat for a variety of pollinators, including Monarch butterflies.



**Learn more** about what you can do to help the Monarch butterfly by scanning the QR code or by going to [www.phoenix.gov/oep/monarch](http://www.phoenix.gov/oep/monarch)

# What do all Pollinators need?

## Shelter, Food, and Energy

### Bees

Bees require secure shelter such as hollow stems, dead wood, ground cavities, or undisturbed soil nests—depending on species—to rear young and protect colonies. For food and energy, they gather nectar (a sugar-rich fuel) and collect pollen, which provides protein and nutrients, especially for larvae.



### Butterflies

Butterflies shelter in tall grasses, shrubs, tree bark crevices, and protected corners of vegetation—these serve as windbreaks, roost sites (safe places to rest), and overwintering habitats. They obtain energy by sipping nectar from a variety of brightly colored, clustered, nectar-rich flowers (e.g. desert marigolds, superstition mallows, **milkweeds**) and may also feed on rotting fruit or damp soil ("puddling") for nutrients. Many species require specific host plants (like **milkweed for monarchs**) where females lay eggs and caterpillars feed exclusively during the larval stage.



### Birds

Hummingbirds—among the few bird pollinators—nest in shrubs and trees using materials like moss, lichen, plant debris, feathers, and spider webs; they prefer sheltered perching and nesting sites with somewhat dense vegetation. Their extremely high metabolism demands frequent access to nectar from tubular, brightly-colored flowers, plus insects and spiders for essential protein during breeding and migration. Offering shade, clean water (like misters or birdbaths), and safe habitat free from predators enhances their comfort and success. Hummingbirds are the most prolific but not the only bird pollinators around here. White wing doves, for example, help pollinate saguaro flowers.



### Bats

Nectar feeding bats roost in dark, sheltered spaces such as caves, tree hollows, old buildings, or dense foliage—often moving frequently between roosts depending on food availability. To fuel their nightly flights and high energy requirements, they visit hundreds of small flowers (e.g. agaves, saguaros, and organ pipe cactus) to sip nectar rich in sugars and amino acids. As they feed, pollen adheres to their fur or faces, enabling cross pollination; many desert plants rely heavily on these bat visitors.



# Milkweeds

# Cacti and Succulents



**Arizona Milkweed**  
*Asclepias angustifolia*

Size: 2.5X2.5  
Bloom Season: Spring  
Thorns: No  
Leaf Habit: Opposite  
Sun: Full Sun  
Water Use: Low

Image courtesy of the Desert Botanical Garden and Kim Pegram



**Banana Yucca**  
*Yucca baccata*

Size: 3X5  
Bloom Season: Spring  
Thorns: No  
Leaf Habit: Opposite  
Sun: Full Sun  
Water Use: Low



**Desert (Rush) Milkweed**  
*Asclepias subulata*

Size: 4X4  
Bloom Season: Spring  
Thorns: No  
Leaf Habit: Opposite  
Sun: Full Sun  
Water Use: Low

Image courtesy of the Arizona Municipal Water Users Association and Dave Seibert



**Mescal Ceniza**  
*Agave colorata*

Size: 3X3  
Bloom Season: Spring  
Thorns: No  
Leaf Habit: Opposite  
Sun: Full Sun  
Water Use: Low


Image courtesy of the Arizona Municipal Water Users Association and Dave Seibert



**Pineneedle Milkweed**  
*Asclepias linaria*

Size: 3X3  
Bloom Season: Spring  
Thorns: No  
Leaf Habit: Opposite  
Sun: Full Sun  
Water Use: Low

Image courtesy of the Desert Botanical Garden and Kim Pegram



**Ocotillo**  
*Fouquieria splendens*

Size: 10X12  
Bloom Season: Spring  
Thorns: Yes  
Leaf Habit: Opposite  
Sun: Full Sun  
Water Use: Low

# Forbs and Shrubs

# Trees



**Chuparosa**  
*Justicia californica*

Size: 4X4  
 Bloom Season: Spring  
 Thorns: No  
 Leaf Habit: Opposite  
 Sun: Full Sun  
 Water Use: Low

Image courtesy of the Arizona Municipal Water Users Association and Carol Ward



**Desert Ironwood**  
*Olneya tesota*

Size: 25X25  
 Bloom Season: Spring  
 Thorns: No  
 Leaf Habit: Opposite  
 Sun: Full Sun  
 Water Use: Low

Image courtesy of the Arizona Municipal Water Users Association and Carol Ward



**Desert Marigold**  
*Baileya multiradiata*

Size: 1X1.5  
 Bloom Season: Spring  
 Thorns: No  
 Leaf Habit: Opposite  
 Sun: Full Sun  
 Water Use: Low

Image courtesy of the Arizona Municipal Water Users Association and Carol Ward



**Foothills Palo Verde**  
*Parkinsonia microphylla*

Size: 15X15  
 Bloom Season: Spring  
 Thorns: No  
 Leaf Habit: Opposite  
 Sun: Full Sun  
 Water Use: Low

Image courtesy of the Arizona Municipal Water Users Association



**Superstition Mallow**  
*Abutilon palmeri*

Size: 4X4  
 Bloom Season: Spring  
 Thorns: No  
 Leaf Habit: Opposite  
 Sun: Full Sun  
 Water Use: Low

Image courtesy of the Arizona Municipal Water Users Association and Dave Seibert

## References and Acknowledgments

Go here to see a list of local nurseries selling Milkweeds! [www.swmonarchs.org/nurseries.php](http://www.swmonarchs.org/nurseries.php)

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