

Sonoran Desert Pollinator Plant Guide

*How to attract pollinators
to your yard!*



City of Phoenix

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Abridged Disclaimer

This plant guide is currently in development. The unabridged version will be released early 2026.

Legend

Size	Bloom Season	Thorns	Leaf Habit	Sun	Water Use
Mature Size ↑ WXH ↓	Blooms in Spring 	No Thorns 	Evergreen 	Full Sun 	Very Low 
	Blooms in Summer 	Thorned 	Semi-Evergreen* 	Full/Partial Sun 	Low 
	Blooms in Fall 		Deciduous 	Partial Shade 	Moderate 
	Blooms in Winter 			Full Sun/Afternoon Shade 	
Butterflies 	Bees 	Bats 	Moths 	Birds 	Caterpillars/ Other Pollinators 

**Some leaves drop for a short time in the winter.*

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

What do all Pollinators need?


Shelter, Food, and Energy

Bees

A close-up photograph of a bee with dark and light brown stripes on its abdomen, hovering over a cluster of small white flowers. The background is a soft-focus green.


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

A monarch butterfly with vibrant orange wings and black veins is perched on a green plant with small yellow-orange buds. The background is a soft-focus green.


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

A hummingbird with iridescent green and blue feathers is hovering in front of a pink flower, its long beak extended towards the center. The background is a soft-focus green.

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

A dark-colored bat is hanging upside down from a branch, its wings partially spread. It is surrounded by green leaves and small white flowers.

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

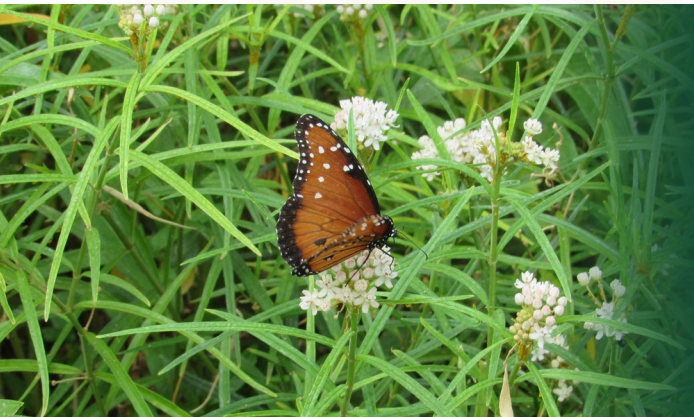


Image courtesy of the Desert Botanical Garden and Kim Pegram



Arizona Milkweed

Asclepias angustifolia



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



Desert (Rush) Milkweed

Asclepias subulata

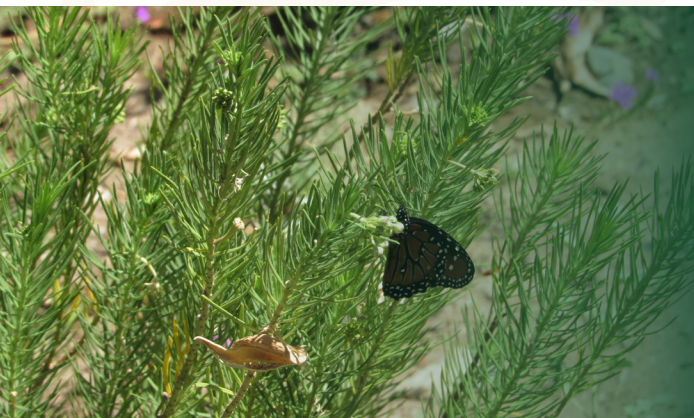


Image courtesy of the Desert Botanical Garden and Kim Pegram



Pineneedle Milkweed

Asclepias linaria



Cacti and Succulents



Banana Yucca

Yucca baccata



Mescal Ceniza

Agave colorata



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



Ocotillo

Fouquieria splendens



Forbs and Shrubs



Chuparosa

Justicia californica



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

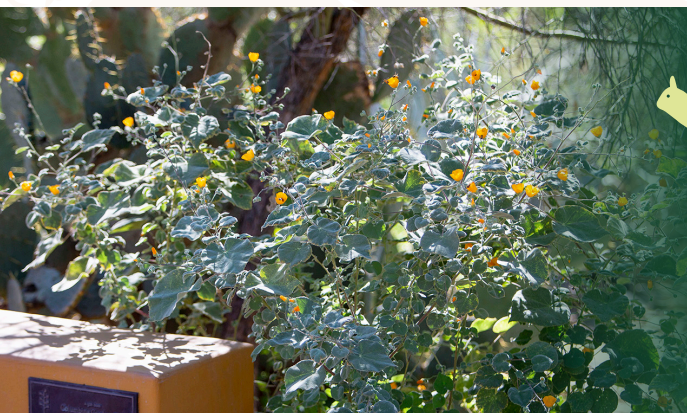


Desert Marigold

Baileya multiradiata



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



Superstition Mallow

Abutilon palmeri



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

Trees



Desert Ironwood

Olneya tesota



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



Foothills Palo Verde

Parkinsonia microphylla



Image courtesy of the Arizona Municipal Water Users Association

References and Acknowledgments

Go here to see a list of local nurseries selling Milkweeds! www.swmonarchs.org/nurseries.php

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