

Helping Monarchs and Pollinators: Rethinking Mowing

With declines in Monarchs and pollinators increasingly in the news, many landowners are wondering how they can help. Here is one way to consider.

Some properties, especially in rural areas, include large areas of lawn. People are accustomed to the “tidy” appearance of a large expanse of green from the roadside. But for Monarch and other pollinators, these areas are not usable habitat. Yet they could offer a partial replacement habitat for the loss of milkweed and meadows along roadsides, windbreaks, hedgerows and in pastures. Depending on your municipality, you may be able to help pollinators by *rethinking mowing*.

Pollinators including the Monarch require a high diversity of flowering plants, including both Milkweed and nectar-producing wildflowers. Consider the following ways to increase and improve habitat on your property.

Reduce mown areas

Even reducing the amount of mown lawn could make a difference for insects, including Monarchs. Consider the area that is needed for regular use, such as for children playing or socializing. The remainder could be either simply allowed to grow, or actively planted with Monarch and pollinators in mind (reference other Factsheets). Allowing a lawn to regenerate to a meadow can, over time, help native wildflowers and Milkweed to establish among the grasses. It will also tolerate drought, resist erosion, reduce runoff, and require no fertilizers – and of course, save time to enjoy the summer.

Reduce the frequency of mowing

If an area is infrequently used (such as for occasional parking, or an annual event), it could be less frequently mown. Mowing promotes non-native grasses: when it is reduced, native wildflowers including Milkweed are more able to compete with the grasses. Limit mowing to twice a year or even less, if possible.

Reconsider the timing of mowing

Mowing vegetation including milkweed during summer and early fall can lead to high mortality of Monarch caterpillars and loss of habitat for other pollinators. Mower blades can kill eggs, caterpillars, chrysalises, and even adult butterflies. The ideal timing varies somewhat by region. In southern Canada, avoid direct mortality by not mowing between June and late August. If possible, mowing is best entirely avoided between about May 15 and October 1. This longer window will not only ensure that the full lifecycle of Monarch can be completed, but it will also provide migrating adult butterflies with native wildflower nectar for their journey south. It will also promote the spread of native plants by allowing them time to flower and produce seed.

It’s also best to mow in the daytime rather than in the cool of the morning or evening. This is because insects, including many pollinators, are more likely to be flying, or active and able to escape.

Reduce impacts by changing techniques

In areas that are infrequently mown, there is evidence that some techniques will benefit Monarchs, pollinators, and other wildlife.

High mowing: Cutting at a height of 8-12 inches seems to minimize impacts to native plants and many insects, and may allow native plants to flower again in the same season.

Patch mowing: Rotating mown areas during the season or between years leaves refuge areas for insects and other wildlife. These areas can provide source populations to recolonize the mown patch.

Using a flushing bar: A bar attached to a mower can warn wildlife of oncoming danger.

Slowing down: Reducing mower speed can give wildlife a chance to escape.

By rethinking mowing at a large scale, thousands of acres of privately owned habitat across southeastern Canada could be improved and made available to Monarch through the season.

For additional ways to restore an area for Monarch and pollinators, see

CWF factsheet (in development)

For more information on dates of arrival of Monarchs in your area, [Journey North](#) provides maps and with the help of citizen scientists, tracks the Monarch migrations in spring and fall.

Monarch Joint Venture has developed a document called [Mowing: Best Practices for Monarch](#) that gives additional background and tips.