

Got Milkweed and Monarchs?

Plants of the genus *Asclepias*, i.e. milkweeds. Common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*) is a native perennial plant abundantly found in the second half of the 20th century in corn and bean fields and along roadsides. We see milkweed less and less due to the destruction of habitat and increased control with herbicides.

The milkweed is aptly named because of the milky sap found in its leaves, stems and pods. You can make your garden friendly to monarchs by eliminating gardening practices that affect butterflies like overuse of pesticides and increasing the number of nectar producing plants for adults and food plants for butterfly caterpillars.

Why is milkweed important?

For monarchs, milkweed is the plant of choice. The female monarch lays eggs on the milkweed. In 4 to 5 days, the larvae, yellow/white/black banded caterpillars, feed solely on the milkweed. And the monarchs are what they eat. The milkweed's "milk" or white latex is acidic and somewhat poisonous to many animals. Since a monarch caterpillar feeds solely on milkweed, it absorbs these substances, cardiac glycosides, into its body and stores them throughout its life.

Consequently, the monarch and the milkweed taste awful to many of its predators. The milkweed's very fragrant, pink blossoms grow in large, rounded, umbrella-like clusters which provide nectar for adult monarchs. Common milkweed is hardy in zones 3-8 and grows 2 to 5 feet high. Thriving in full sun to partial shade, it can be grown in all types of soil. Because it requires minimal amounts of water, milkweed makes a good addition to the garden. The opposite, dark green leaves of common milkweed are large, 6-8 inches in length and 2-4 inches wide. In autumn, flowers develop into spindle-shaped pods, 2-4 inches long. When dry, the seedpods crack open to disperse fluffy clumps of silk with flat, brown seeds. The silk was used to fill life jackets in WWII and is still used to fill natural fiber pillows. Because the seeds easily become airborne, pods should be discarded before they dry to avoid the spread of plants to areas of the garden where they are unwelcome.

Native Americans had many uses for the milkweed: fiber for ropes and fishnets, medicine for wart removal and sweetener from the flower nectar. Be warned--the milkweed plant is mildly toxic and will cause vomiting and diarrhea if ingested. Also, the milky sap can cause irritation if it comes into contact with the eyes.

Other varieties of milkweed that adapt well to the garden are the orange flowered Butterfly Weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), Yellow Milkweed (*A. tuberosa* 'Hello Yellow'), Blood Flower Milkweed (*A. curassavica*) and pink-purple flowered Swamp Milkweed (*A. incarnata*). Seed is available for these species as well as for common milkweed.

More on Monarchs

Monarch butterflies cannot survive a long cold winter. Instead, they spend the winter in warm roosting spots. No butterfly migrates like the Monarchs of North America. They travel much farther than all other tropical butterflies, up to 3,000 miles. They are the only butterflies to make such a long, two-way migration every year. Amazingly, they fly in masses to the same winter roosts, often to the exact same trees. Individuals only make the round-trip once. It is 3-5 generations later that return south the following fall.

In the fall, Monarchs west of the Rocky Mountains travel to small groves of trees along the California coast. Eucalyptus trees, Monterey pines, and Monterey cypress trees shelter them from wind and storms. Those east of the Rocky Mountains fly farther south to a mountain region in central Mexico. They choose spots that are close to but not quite freezing. When they are cool, they don't use up their energy reserves. They cluster together, covering whole tree trunks and branches. There they remain in hibernation until the following spring.

As winter ends and the days grow longer, the Monarchs become more active. They leave their Mexican roosts during the second week of March, flying north and east looking for milkweed plants on which to lay their eggs. These Monarchs have already survived a long southward flight in the fall and all of the hazards along the way as well as in the winter roosting spots, and are the only Monarchs left that can produce a new generation. If they return too early, before the milkweed is up in the spring, they will not be able to lay their eggs and continue the cycle.

Before they die, the migrating females lay eggs on the milkweed plants they find throughout the southern United States. When these caterpillars hatch and turn into adults, they in turn continue the journey northward. Summer Monarchs live a much briefer life than the over-wintering generation; their adult lifespan is only three to five weeks compared to eight or nine months for the over-wintering adults. Over the summer, there are three or four generations of Monarch butterflies. Since each female lays hundreds of eggs, the total number of Monarch butterflies increases throughout the summer. Before the summer ends, there are once again millions of Monarchs all over the United States.

Even though the Monarch population grows to millions each year, these amazing butterflies are seriously threatened by human activities. In the United States, Monarchs face direct habitat destruction caused by humans. New roads, housing developments, and urban expansions all destroy natural landscapes that provide food and protection. Additionally, milkweed, the plant the Monarch larvae feed on exclusively, is considered a weed by some people, which means it is often destroyed. Both milkweed and adult nectar plants are also vulnerable to herbicides used by many landscapers and gardeners. Many pesticides can kill monarchs themselves. Please use herbicides and pesticides sparingly, if at all, and plant milkweeds to attract Monarchs to your garden so you may enjoy these beautiful, mysterious creatures.

For more information on Monarch migration go to:

<http://www.monarch-butterfly.com/index.html> or <http://www.monarchwatch.org/>

If you have milkweed growing in your yard or garden be sure to check it carefully to see if there are Monarchs on it before you take it out of your garden. My sources tell me that Monarchs in the area are still very active and the generation being born now will be the one making the long journey south for the winter in the coming months.

Put milkweed on your list of plants to buy for your garden next year if you want to have Monarch Butterflies in your yard/garden.

West Virginia Gypsy Moth Suppression Program

The Gypsy Moth Suppression Program is a cooperative regional suppression program between landowners, the County Commissions in the generally infested counties, The West Virginia (WVU) Cooperative Extension Service, WVDA, and the United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service (USDA-FS). Aerial treatments will be done in the generally infested area on a demand basis only to minimize the damage to forests and reduce the impact of the gypsy moth in future years. Treatments will not be done with the intent of eradicating the pest. Landowners in the 34 participating counties of West Virginia that have had problems with the gypsy moth may sign up for the program any time between now and the end of August at the West Virginia University (WVU) Extension Service county office, or through the WVDA offices at: Charleston (304) 558-2212, Elkins (304/637-0290), New Creek (304)788-1066, or Morgantown (304) 285-3133. The completed applications must be submitted by August 31, 2009. Brochures about the gypsy moth and the 2010 CSCL Program are also available from Extension agents or they can be downloaded from the WVDA website at www.wvagriculture.org. For more information, contact Gary Gibson, Director or S. Clark Haynes, WVDA, Assistant Division Director of the Plant Industries Division in Charleston, at 304-558-2212 or Quentin "Butch" Sayers, WVDA, Gypsy Moth Program Manager, at 304-788-1066. Additional information and assistance may also be obtained through you local WVDA offices located at: Charleston (304) 558-2212, Elkins (304) 637-0290, Morgantown (304) 285-3133, and New Creek (304)788-1066. Or on the WVDA New Creek Web site at <http://wvdanewcreek.home.comcast.net>

2009 Day of Caring

This year's annual "Day of Caring" will kick off the United Way's funding campaign on September 15th this year. As in the past, PVAS will have lots of volunteer opportunities at the Yankauer preserve. This year's projects include pulling Japanese Stilt Grass, pulling weeds in the Butterfly Garden, weed control in the parking lot, mulching trails, and other tasks. The day will begin with a breakfast "Kick Off" for all volunteers at 7:30am at War Memorial Park in Martinsburg. Volunteers start coming to the preserve around 8:30 or 9 am for an orientation and to start working. Lunch will be provided by PVAS at Yankauer for volunteers working there, and there will be a dinner celebrating all

of the participating volunteers' labors and assistance from 4:30 - 6pm at the Clarion Hotel in Shepherdstown. If you'd like to volunteer, please contact Tim Murphy at 304-876-8133 or timurf@comcast.net or Kristin Alexander at 304-676-3397 or PVASmail@aol.com. This is our opportunity to give the preserve its annual "facelift" so please come spend the day with us!

Topiary Garden Video Showing

The Berkeley/Jefferson County Master Gardeners will be showing a video on Topiary Gardens on Tuesday, September 15 at 7 pm at the WVU Tree Fruit Research and Education Center in Kearneysville. More information to follow.

Garden Tips

- Renovate lawn or reseed bare spots
- Dig late potatoes
- Plant crocus

Until next time ...Happy Gardening and Farming!