

Friday's Feature

By

Theresa Friday

October 8, 2007

Create a waystation to help the monarch butterfly

The monarch butterfly is one of the most well-known butterfly species in North America. They are known not only for their beauty, but also because they are one of the few migratory butterfly species of the United States. Unfortunately, monarch migrations are being threatened by several environmental factors.



Like birds, monarch butterflies follow a pattern of seasonal migration. There are two distinct populations in North America, those that breed in the East and those that breed in the West. Each autumn, millions of monarchs leave their breeding grounds and fly to overwintering sites. The Eastern population overwinters in the mountains of Mexico. The Western breeders spend their winters along the California coast.

A very small number of monarchs overwinter in pine trees at a few sites along the Gulf coast of Florida, near Tampa and west of Tallahassee.

Along their migrational path, monarchs must stop to feed on flower nectar and to roost together at night.

But with North America's rural land being developed at an alarming rate, monarchs face an increasing shortage of suitable plants upon which the caterpillars and adults can feed making migration more difficult.

To offset this habitat loss, gardeners and butterfly enthusiasts can set aside special patches of land in an effort to create "Monarch Waystations" — places where monarchs can reproduce in spring and summer, and stop for much-needed nectar breaks as they fly south in the fall.

Without resources - in the form of nectar from flowers - fall migratory monarchs would be unable to make the journey to Mexico. Similarly, without milkweeds along the entire route north in the spring and summer months, monarchs would not be able to produce the successive generations that culminate in the migration each fall.

Adults feed on nectar from all varieties of milkweeds. In the fall, monarchs will visit other flowers including goldenrod, ironweed and tickseed sunflower.

The caterpillars, however, feed only on milkweeds of the genus *Asclepias*. From these plants they acquire and store toxins that help protect them from predators.

Growing milkweed is an important way gardeners can assist monarch populations. One of their favorite plants is the scarlet milkweed.

Scarlet milkweed is an erect, evergreen perennial, often grown as an annual. Like most milkweeds, it has opposite leaves and milky sap. Scarlet milkweed gets about 3 to 4 feet tall. The flowers are orange and red and are 2 to 4 inches across. It blooms continuously from spring until autumn.

Scarlet milkweed is easy to grow, thriving in dry, moist, and even wet soils. The leaves are often attacked by aphids. The aphids produce excrement called honeydew which in turn is covered by a grayish black fungus called sooty mold. None of this is life-threatening to the milkweed, and eventually some other predators (such as ladybugs) will come along and eat the aphids.

The fall monarch migration in Northwest Florida is at its height in October. So take some time to add milkweed and other nectar plants to your garden. You will be contributing to monarch conservation and will be helping to assure the continuation of the monarch migration in North America.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

For additional information about all of the county extension services and other articles of interest go to: <http://santarosa.ifas.ufl.edu>.