LET'S GROW Native

Column and photograph by Carol A. Heiser

Lynda Richardson / DWR

Monarch butterflies lay their eggs on milkweed which feeds their hungry caterpillars.

Plant a patch of butterfly-weed (orange flowers) in combination with common milkweed (tall plants in right foreground and left background), to support monarchs and other pollinators.

Monarch butterflies need your help. When female monarchs visit your yard or neighborhood, they're not just looking for a sip of nectar, they're also looking to lay their eggs on their "host" plant, the milkweed (genus *Asclepias*). Milkweeds are an important group of plants whose leaves contain a toxic white, latex, alkaloid sap. This cardiac glycoside imparts predator protection to the monarch caterpillars that eat the plants, and also to the adults they subsequently transform into. No milkweeds? No monarchs.

Unfortunately, old-school landscape maintenance practices have trained us to mow, spray, or whack milkweed out of existence, resulting in serious habitat loss for monarchs, especially when combined with the related impacts of urban development and conventional agricultural management. But milkweeds are attractive and easy to grow. These perennials emerge in very late spring and grow throughout the summer, usually blooming between June and August, then becoming dormant in winter.

More than a dozen native milkweed species occur in Virginia's ecosystems; the three found commonly and typically available for purchase are: common milkweed (*A. syriaca*), butterfly-weed (*A. tuberosa*), and swamp milkweed (*A. incarnata*).

Common milkweed is a tall, lanky plant that can grow to six feet and is usually found in fairly dry, open fields or naturalized meadows, in association with native grasses and other perennials. Its large, round, showy pink flower heads are highly fragrant during peak bloom and provide nectar to bees, butterflies, and other insects.

Butterfly-weed is diminutive in comparison, growing to only 12 to 24 inches tall in well-drained soil, with a mounded habit punctuated by bright orange flowers at bloom time.

Swamp milkweed is clump-forming and more bush-like, growing to about three or four feet tall, usually in moister conditions than the other two species, and it sports pale pink flower heads.

Early autumn is a critical time of year for monarchs. In late summer and early fall, as adult butterflies migrate south to their overwintering sites in Mexico, they stop along the way to breed and lay eggs. Each succeeding generation of monarchs that arises from the stopovers will also hatch to feed as caterpillars on milkweed, form a chrysalis, and then emerge as new adults that will fly further south.

Here in Virginia, we receive our last "wave" of monarchs, when most of the eggs are laid, sometime between mid-July to late August. Healthy milkweed patches are critical habitats between late August and the end of September, when the last of the caterpillars that hatch will seek out leaves to feed and grow on, then metamorphose into the adults that will complete the journey south.

If you don't have any milkweed in your landscape, fall is a great time to plant! Establish your garden beds now with new milkweed plants or plugs to get a jump-start on next year's growing season, and do your part to support migrating monarchs.

Carol A. Heiser is a Level 1 certified Chesapeake Bay Landscape Professional and a retired Habitat Education Coordinator from the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources.

RESOURCES

- Journey North: Track the movement of migrating monarchs and report your observations at *https://journeynorth.org/tm/monarch/FallWatch.html*
- Monarch Watch: Learn how to create a Monarch Waystation garden, get instructions for how to grow your own milkweed, order plugs for your eco-region, find up-to- date research, and much more at *https://monarchwatch.org*