

"Just Add Water"

Articles and Photos by Soni Forsman

Plant Milkweed – Keep Monarchs Off Endangered List

A while ago, I read a reference to the first Saturday in May being National Start Seeing Monarchs Day. There was no explanation to what ‘Start Seeing Monarchs’ meant so I jotted a note to check it out later. It is indeed a proclaimed day on the National Day Calendar. This year the date is May 4th.

It is not a celebration of the first sightings of Monarchs in the spring but rather a day ‘established to keep the Monarch butterfly from being added to the endangered species list.’ For this to happen, www.startseeingmonarchs.org promotes the planting of a variety of milkweeds and growing them without the use of herbicides and pesticides.

Milkweed is the host plant for probably the most recognizable butterfly in North America. The female lays eggs on the underside of the leaves and the larvae (caterpillars) munches on its foliage until the third phase of its lifecycle, the pupa (chrysalis) stage.

Common milkweed has popped up in the sunny, moist and non-cultivated areas of our yard but I have been remiss in not planting more swamp milkweed in our cared-for gardens. It was only a few years ago that I added two *Asclepias incarnata* ‘Ice Ballet’ plants. Initially, I used one in each of two container water gardens.

I was amazed how quickly the adult Monarchs discovered my token offerings. One plant seemed a favorite. Soon there were caterpillars then one chrysalis and finally a new adult. I just happened to walk by the container as the newly emerged butterfly was resting, puffing up its wings before flying away to begin the next generation.

I have now planted the milkweeds directly into my perennial/annual gardens. One is in a small garden near the deck. It was fun watching the Monarchs visit last summer so close to the house. Soon, we were watching the caterpillars crawl all over the foliage, dining as they slithered along.

Once they were done eating and it was time to begin the transformation into adults all left the host plant and crawled onto to nearby plants, a lotus and a taro growing in containers of water. Unfortunately, no butterflies emerged from any of the chrysalis. The wind whipped the two off a lotus pad and the ones on the taro dried up.

Cleaning the taro container before storing it away for the winter, I found two empty chrysalises still attached to it. It seems a couple caterpillars had ventured down on to the pot and became adults. I felt a little better after the earlier disappointments.



***Asclepias incarnata* 'Ice Ballet'**

As a marginal plant in a container water garden with *Nymphaea* pygmy 'Alba' and water hyacinth.)



**Next-generation Monarch ready to leave the confines of its chrysalis,
hanging from a swamp milkweed leaf**

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Newly emerged adult Monarch ready for takeoff.



An empty chrysalis stills clings to the embossed dragonfly design on a watertight container late in the fall.