

## Monarch butterfly threatened by diminished habitat

By Karen Bjornland



A monarch butterfly sits atop swamp milkweed, which can serve as a good native milkweed. (Courtesy Wild Things Rescue Nursery)

Seven years ago, when Chris and Emily DeBolt opened Fiddlehead Creek, a pesticide-free, native plant nursery in Washington County, there were lots of monarch butterflies.

“The place was covered in monarchs. It was amazing how many butterflies we had,” says Emily DeBolt.

This summer, DeBolt has yet to see a single monarch among the butterflies that flutter in their gardens and fields.

In Rensselaer County, at Wild Things Rescue Nursery, another haven for native plants, owner Dawn Foglia is on the lookout.

“A couple of days ago, we saw our first one,” says Foglia.

“They say that they’re doing better than last year, but it’s still not good. There is a push to put them on the Endangered Species list, but it usually takes about two years.”

In 2014, the Center for Biological Diversity and the Center for Food Safety filed a petition requesting Endangered Species Act protection for the monarch and its habitat. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is reviewing the request.

According to Monarch Watch, a non-profit educational outreach program based at the University of Kansas, habitats for monarchs and other wildlife are disappearing at the rate of 6,000 acres per day or 2.2 million acres each year, an area the size of Delaware and Rhode Island combined.

In the Capital Region, on roadsides and in fields, there seem to be plenty of milkweed plants, the food of monarch caterpillars.

So why is there a problem?

“It’s really the bigger picture, the majority of the monarch habitat is in the Midwest,” says DeBolt. “We’ve lost so much of that milkweed. And there’s the deforestation of their wintering habitat in Mexico, and all sorts of other things. We still have milkweed but the population overall has declined so much that it’s impacting us.”

Monarch Watch says the planting of genetically modified crops, like herbicide-resistant corn and soybeans, has decimated monarch habitat. These crops allow growers to spray fields with glyphosate (Roundup), which kills the milkweed, reducing the summer breeding ground for monarchs.

### Gardeners can help

Even though the big problem is in the Midwest, DeBolt and Foglia say gardeners in our region can help the monarch.

“Home gardeners can help tremendously if they started planting milkweed,” says Foglia.

But the milkweed you see on the side of the road is not the one to plant.

“It’s not really a good garden plant, it would take over a garden. It’s a good edge-of-the-property plant,” she says.

“There are beautiful milkweeds that are native to New York, wonderful milkweeds for the garden that behave themselves and still serve as a larval host plant for the monarch.”

Foglia also advises gardeners to ask their nursery or big box store if the flowers and plants have been grown with neonics or neonicotinoids, a systemic insecticide.

Some big box stores have started labeling plants so consumers know how they were grown.

“From the time the seeds germinate, they are watering it with a water/pesticide mix, so it is drinking up this pesticide, and it’s going into every cell of its being: its nectar, its flowers, its leaves. You bring it home and a caterpillar starts munching it, and at the very least, it gets very sick, if not dies because that pesticide is in the cells of the plant.”

The common milkweed on the roadsides should also be allowed to grow, Foglia says.

“There are some towns that have stopped mowing and spraying where they see milkweed.”

Monarchs need more than the common milkweed on the roadsides, says DeBolt.

“We should plant as much milkweed as we can so hopefully they can start to recover.”

Gardeners also need to feed the adult butterflies, she says.

“That habitat on the side of the road isn’t necessarily ideal for them as far as nectar species.

It’s putting in gardens and landscapes and the other things they need, like the asters and Joe Pye weed. With more and more development and habitat loss, backyards are becoming more and more important. If everyone did it, it would add up and really make a difference.”

## Many species

At Wild Things, Foglia grows 10 species of milkweed because she has customers who live in the West and the South.

“There’s only about six of them native to New York. It is advisable to plant the ones that are native to your area,” she says.

All milkweeds belong to the genus *Asclepias*, which was named by the 18th-century Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus after *Asclepias*, the Greek god of healing, because of the plant’s use as a folk medicine.

“The main two for gardening and for our region are butterfly weed and swamp milkweed,” says DeBolt.

“Butterfly weed is this really beautiful bright orange native milkweed. It’s really popular.” Swamp milkweed is “a little taller and more of like a pink-purple,” she says.

“They are both more of a flat-top flower as opposed to the ball, which is the common milkweed. And they both grow in more of a clump, like a nice perennial in a garden.”

DeBolt has noticed a growing awareness of milkweed and monarchs in recent years.

“A lot of people have definitely heard about it. We’ve had people calling since the spring to reserve their plants.”

The DeBolts even get calls from people looking for the common milkweed.

“The common milkweed is great if you have some space,” she says.

At Wild Things, Foglia says interest in garden-friendly milkweed has greatly increased.

“A lot of the rare ones, I’ve sold before they are ready. I have waiting lists,” she says.

Every year, DeBolt sets up a booth at the Washington County Fair and brings monarch caterpillars and milkweed so visitors can learn about the butterfly’s life cycle.

She always finds caterpillars in the field, brings them to the fair and then returns them to the field.

“Last year, I couldn’t find any to grab. I think it was the first year I didn’t get to do that,” she says.

“I’m hopeful for this year, I’m just kind of waiting to see.”

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