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NATIVE NEWS

Spence Restoration Nursery

Help Save the Monarch Butterfly with Native Larval Food and Nectar Plants

The precipitous decline of pollinating insects has been well documented over the past decade. Varied factors including pesticides, parasites, conversion of conservation lands to row crops, drought, and elimination of larval food plants in clean farming practices have all contributed to difficult times for various pollinators. No species is more emblematic of this crisis than the iconic Monarch butterfly. The recent news that only a portion of last year's record low population has arrived at their wintering grounds in Mexico is a tragic wake up call.

For the Monarch, a variety of factors have conspired to decimate its population. Deforestation of their wintering grounds in Mexico has left them more exposed to inclement winter weather. Successive droughts in 2011 and 2012 left little nectar for refueling along their migration routes through the southern plains. The conversion of millions of acres of conservation lands for corn production to satisfy the ethanol boom destroyed much of their breeding habitat in the western corn belt. Finally, the adaptable common milkweed (Asclepias syriaca) that was able to tolerate row crop agriculture has been decimated by the advent of genetically-modified herbicide-resistant crops, succumbing to the multiple herbicide applications that characterize this style of agriculture. Can the Monarch be saved? No one knows for sure, but it seems like a difficult challenge in the absence of major changes to our land use practices. While lawmakers debate the agricultural policies that have contributed to this alarming trend, each of us that owns property or designs landscapes can help make a difference. Steps to reverse this trend include planting both larval food and nectar producing plants in the landscape and getting rid of lawn as the default treatment for open space

It is vital to include both larval food plants and nectar producing plants to help butterflies like the Monarch. Although milkweeds are a nectar source as well as the larval food plant, they must be accompanied by other nectar producing species. Since most milkweeds have finished flowering by mid August in the Midwest, they are ineffective at powering the fall migration. Late blooming species of asters, goldenrods, blazing stars, joe-pye weeds, and ironweeds will provide the vital nectar in late August and September to fuel the annual migration. Some of the best species include New England Aster (Aster novae-angliae) Stiff Goldenrod (Solidago rigida), Tall Ironweed (Vernonia altissima), Spotted Joe-Pye Weed (Eupatorium maculatum), and Rough Blazing Star (Liatris aspera).

In order to provide an abundance of these nectar producing plants in the landscape, it is time to end the reign of lawn as the default treatment for open space in our developments. The use of forb-rich native meadow or prairie plantings will provide the vital nectar and larval food plants for the Monarch and other butterflies. Additional benefits of reduced lawn area include lower maintenance, increased storm water infiltration, and better air quality.

Plant Feature: Sullivant's Milkweed (Asclepias sullivantii)

An attractive, but little known species of wet mesic to mesic prairies, Sullivant's milkweed thrives in full sun and fertile soil. It grows to about 3 feet in height, producing bright pink flowers in late June through early August . Although it bears some resemblance to the aggressive common milkweed, the leaves are usually narrower with a red mid-vein and the flower clusters are generally less spherical than common milkweed. The brighter pink flowers produce a very sweet fragrance, attracting Monarchs and a variety of other pollinators. It does spread by rhizomes, but in a less aggressive manner than common milkweed. Sullivant's milkweed is quite tolerant of temporary inundation of up to 24 hours or more, making it ideal for rain gardens that use existing topsoil. In a restoration, Sullivant's milkweed should be used in mesic to wet prairies with associates in our Mesic Prairie Mix and Wet Mesic Prairie Mix .

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