

Beginning about the middle of March, millions upon millions of monarch butterflies will be making their ways back to the USA as they return from the forested mountainsides in south central Mexico where they spend their winters. Monarch scientists and enthusiasts had feared lower numbers this year but, I'm pleased to report, the estimates are actually up slightly over 2007-'08.

A common question about these tiny travelers is whether they are the same individuals who made the two- to three-thousand mile migrations in the fall. I asked entomology guru Dr. Mike Quinn this question a couple of years ago and was assured that, yes, they are. That's actually the unique thing about monarchs. There are insects that migrate farther (some dragonflies have been shown to cross the Pacific Ocean!) but we know of no other insect that makes the return migration as well.

The monarchs who return, by then about seven months old, won't have much time left. They'll mate and survey the terrain below for the milkweed plants upon which they must lay their eggs. A great way to help is to pick up a milkweed plant at your local nursery and put it in your garden. Actually, you can just leave it in the pot on your patio or balcony. If there are monarchs passing through your area, they'll find that plant, lay some tiny white eggs on the leaves and, in 4-5 days, you'll have some itty-bitty caterpillars (they're striped black, white and yellow within a couple of days).

There are actually over a hundred species of "milkweeds" in the genus *Asclepias* and monarchs only utilize about half of them. There are two species in particular they seem to favor. The "tropical milkweed," scientifically known as *Asclepias curassivica*, is probably the best loved by monarchs. We had to buy three rounds of these last year because we had so many caterpillars and those gluttonous little fatties defoliated the first two all the way down to the stems!

Tropical milkweed is non-native to the US, however. If you want to go with a native route, swamp milkweed, *Asclepias incarnate*, is another great option (confirm that it's native to your state at http://www.wildflower.org/plants/result.php?id_plant=ASIN). I haven't used these myself yet but I'll be trying them this spring. (wildflower.org has lots of great information about milkweeds and gardening with native plants).

Be prepared, however, to see whole "cycle of life" in action. We had some caterpillars killed most gruesomely by hornets and another poor fellow who emerged from his chrysalis only to fall to the ground before its wings had hardened. It made us realize just what an endeavor a metamorphosis is. Each clear, opened chrysalis became a sign of victory—another monarch that made it!

We also learned about aphids and potato beetles that also turned up feasting on our milkweeds. We discussed and practiced organic gardening methods but, as it really turned out, those milkweeds are quite hardy. They leafed out again after every infestation (that includes monarchs from the milkweeds' perspective).

Overall, I highly recommend giving it a try. My family found real joy and excitement in watching the growth, transformation and drama right off our front porch.

Learn pretty much all you could care to know about monarch butterflies at www.learner.org/jnorth/monarch/. It's geared for students as well as scientists and laymen alike and it's the absolute best science-oriented website I've come across. I also have a song about monarchs and you can see the video free right there on my homepage, www.lucasmiller.net.