

Loretta Shigo: Trailing the monarchs VII

Milkweed Seedpods and Migration Update

Asclepias syriaca, (common milkweed) is described as a pest in some dictionaries.

We monarch watchers know better. If we could offer up the description, perhaps it would read: Milkweed, (-wéd') n 1. A "top-to-bottom" ecosystem with leaves of milky sap providing homes and insects (especially monarch butterflies and caterpillars). 2. Has dense flower clusters that scent the air with perfume attracting nectar feeders from near and afar. 3. Produces seedpods that ripen, then burst; releasing one to two hundred seeds apiece, each tethered to a parachute of silky floss enabling it to float – effortlessly, on the wind. Now that describes milkweed!

Autumn has embraced Bucks County; lush gardens are but fading memories. Dry, yellowed milkweed stalks laden with pods stand tall in the fields and beckon to seed loving animals and insects. Each seedpod developed from an individually fertilized flower. Of the hundreds on each plant, mere chance determined those few flowers visited and fertilized by nectar-seeking, pollen-laden insects. The seductive call of the seedpod reaches my ear also. I busy myself with pod collection. You can too.

Find a milkweed patch. Ask permission to collect if the patch is not your own. Wear boots; bring a paper bag and a sense of adven-



Common milkweed seed.

ture. Collect pods that are insect free and that have split open revealing the silky white floss and dark brown seed. Dry the pods well on a tray. Separate floss from seed by shaking the pods in a bag; the seeds will fall to the bottom. Add a handful of potting soil. Scatter the floss outdoors or keep for a winter project.

Store the bagged seed away from mice and insects in an unheated shed for the winter or put it in the refrigerator for three months. Check for mold now and then. This simulates vernalization – nature's method of preparing seed for

germination by providing cold winter temperatures.

A seed can be started indoors or planted directly in the ground. Come March, add sand to the bag and shake, scarifying the seed – scratching the seed's surface. Plant in small pots, three seeds each. Provide water, warmth, and light.

All the seeds may not germinate; harden off the ones that do and transplant to a sunny place after all danger of frost has passed. To direct sow, turn over the soil in a sunny location and dig in some compost. Plant seeds ¼" deep and 8" apart, cover with soil, and water

well. Dream butterfly dreams.

Milkweed floss has its place in United States history. During World War II, seedpods were collected and sent to the Milkweed Floss Corporation of America in Petoskey, Mich. The seeds were removed and the silky floss, having five times the buoyancy of cork; six times the warmth of wool and lighter in weight, was used to stuff Mae West life jackets and flight jacket linings.

Today, consumers can find sleeping bags, Arctic and camping clothing, and bedding stuffed with a mix of synthetic fibers, down and milkweed floss.

To learn more about milkweed and continue following the trail of the monarch, check out the following resources: Monarch Watch: monarchwatch.org; Journey North: learner.org/jnorth; Monarch Lab: monarchlab.org; and the Monarch Teacher Network (MTN).

MTN provides workshops called Teaching/Learning With Monarch Butterflies. Having attended this workshop in 2006 and volunteering in 2008, I met other citizen scientists and teachers who bring the monarch into classrooms as well as their own living rooms – wherever a rearing cage will fit!

These organizations have helped to broaden my knowledge of the monarch. I want to acknowledge and thank them for their dedication to the monarch, particularly the

on-line discussion groups from Monarch Watch and MTN. Thanks to Erik Mollenhauer of MTN for the use of his photograph that was published in my previous article showing a monarch cluster in Mexico.

A must-have field guide that fits in a back pocket, "Milkweed, Monarchs and More," by Ba Rea, Karen Oberhauser and Michael A. Quinn, has proven to be a valuable resource in and out of the milkweed patch. It can be ordered from the Monarch Journey web site address below.

For now, this series has ended, yet the journey of the monarch continues. Señora Rocío Treviño, Mexico's migration-tracking program coordinator, reported to Journey North last week: "At last! Thousands and thousands of monarchs appeared across northern Mexico this week. ... Monarch butterflies adorned the sky and fields across Coahuila like we haven't seen for years. [October 20]."

Now that's music to this monarch watcher's ear!

Thanks to the Herald for bringing this citizen scientist's journey with the monarch to you, the reader.

Be Part of the journey – plant milkweed.

Visit monarchjourney.com for school program information and more. E-mail info@monarchjourney.com or call 267-614-3609.