

Loretta Shigo: Amazing butterflies

Monarchs are coming our way

Part One

An insect that weighs less than a gram, tastes with its feet, smells with its antenna and flies up to 3,000 miles to a place it's never been – sound incredible? You bet! Is this insect something rare, found only in the far most reaches of our planet? No!

The amazing monarch butterfly can be found zipping through the fields and gardens of Bucks County during the dog days of summer. That is – in July, August and beyond, after completing an incredible journey from the southern states to reach our area in time to mate, lay eggs and produce a few more generations of butterflies before autumn cools the air and colors the leaves sending the last generation of monarchs south – to their over-wintering grounds

in Central Mexico.

It is an epic story. Every year, millions of monarchs migrate to the cool Transvolcanic Mountains of Central Mexico. In the shelter of Oyamel fir forests, they spend the winter, forming colonies and conserving energy. In March, they head north to Texas and the Gulf Coast in search of milkweed to lay the eggs of the next generation.

The spring migration north is under way, and millions of monarchs have left their over-wintering grounds. There have been sightings in the Washington area, however it will take two or three generations before the first monarchs arrive in Bucks County sometime in mid-July.

There are four stages to the complete metamorphosis of a



monarch – the egg, the larva or caterpillar, the pupa or chrysalis and the adult butterfly. The egg is found on the underside of the leaf of a host plant – milkweed. One wild female may lay 100 to 200 football-shaped eggs during her short lifetime.

An egg will hatch in three to five days if not eaten by a predator. Upon hatching, the tiny transparent caterpillar often eats its egg shell and then begins a munching expedition, causing it to grow almost 3,000 times its original weight. If we compared that in human terms, a baby would weigh as much as a school bus in three weeks.

Browse the list and see if you have some of these nectar source plants. Start thinking about where to put additional nectar sources

and milkweed plants. Milkweed needs space, as it gradually takes over. Look for patches of common milkweed in your area. Ask the person whose property they are on to mow around them. Become a caretaker of the milkweed patch.

I have seen “Please Don’t Mow” signs next to milkweed patches along the road – commonplace, especially in Bucks County. Every milkweed plant is important, as it represents potential food for the survival of the monarch butterfly population.

Future articles will feature amazing egg, caterpillar, pupa and butterfly biology; tips for locating and caring for caterpillars; resource info; the Great Migration; milkweed seed collecting and more! Until then. Be part of the journey. Plant milkweed.