Sustaining Monarch Butterflies and Planting Way Stations

 Beate Popkin

Monarch butterflies need milkweed plants since they will eat nothing else during their caterpillar stage. In their adult stage, i.e. as butterflies, they will sip nectar from a large range of flowers that do not need to be milkweed. Indeed, during their migration south, milkweeds are pretty much done flowering, and other plants will feed the Monarchs that pass through our region.

I plant common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca),* swamp milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*) and butterfly milkweed (*Asclepias tuberosa*). The first two bloom pink and are quite tall (5’ and 4’ respectively), the last blooms orange and is only 1-2’ tall. These milkweeds need full sun and the soil needs to warm up before they emerge from the ground. They easily set seed in large characteristic pods that open late in the season. There are other species of milkweed that monarch caterpillars will feed on, but I have found them more difficult to grow.

Common milkweed is a coarse but beautiful plant that flowers in May and June. It spreads easily by thick underground rhizomes and for that reason may not be suitable for small gardens. It usually needs to be contained, but may also die back. This is probably the plant most affected by the blanket spraying of Round-up in agricultural fields that has recently contributed so much to habitat loss for Monarchs.

Swamp milkweed does not need to grow in a swamp, but it is not drought tolerant. It needs at least average garden soil and some moisture during dry spells. It grows in clumps and flowers in July and August.

Butterfly milkweed can easily drown in too much water. It should be planted in a fairly dry site. It flowers in June.

Other milkweeds can be found on the website of Monarch Watch, and the USDA Plant Data base will give information about their natural presence in Kentucky.

All milkweeds produce a white sap in their stems and leaves (hence the name) that is toxic to many animals and also to humans. One needs to wash it off one’s hands and be careful not to get it in one’s eyes.

During their adult stage, Monarchs, like all butterflies, need nectar for food and will feed on many different species of plants. Here are a few great nectar plants, roughly in the order of seasonal bloom: the beardtongues, purple and Tennessee coneflowers, monardas and mountain mints (especially garden-worthy: short-toothed mountain mint - *Pycnanthemum muticum*), Giant Hyssop, all Liatris, Joe Pye weed, all goldenrods (very garden-worthy: elm-leafed goldenrod and scented goldenrod), all asters (I like New England aster, calico aster, and for late season bloom, aromatic aster).