

Nature at Risk series

Your Small Changes Can Help Bring Monarchs Back

Brodhead Watershed Association

Swallowtail. Spicebush. Red Admiral. Painted Lady. Fritillary. Among all the enchantingly-named butterflies of Pennsylvania, it's the Monarch that flutters our hearts.

With its big, orange-and-black stained-glass wings, it's the first butterfly children can name. For grownups, just the sight of them flitting among the fragrant milkweed on a warm afternoon can raise a smile and kindle memories of summers gone by. Even their pudgy, clown-colored caterpillars are delightful.

Yet, recently, you may have wondered "where are all the Monarchs?"

In fact, Monarch butterflies are in steep decline, according to the Center for Biological Diversity. Over the last 20 years, their numbers have dropped by 85 percent.

Habitat loss is a big part of the problem. Acres of lawn, pavement, warehouses and other buildings now cover the natural fields of goldenrod, ironweed, phlox, Joe Pye weed and other food sources that butterflies rely on. Loss of milkweed, the only plant on which the Monarch caterpillar thrives, compounds the problem.

Lawn-care companies, business parks, and even well-intentioned gardeners who use bug killers and weed killers make things even worse. That's because bug sprays don't distinguish between harmful beetles and beneficial butterflies. Weed killers don't distinguish between stilt grass and milkweed.

Climate change — with its boom-and-bust cycle of rainfall — stresses and harms the butterflies' food sources.

Small changes in your home landscape can help. Reduce or eliminate the use of insecticides and herbicides in your own landscape. Plant a variety of native flowering plants that bloom in succession over spring, summer, and

fall to help support all kinds of pollinators, from hummingbirds to Monarchs. Set aside space in a sunny spot to grow milkweed, the nursery of this butterfly.

You may be rewarded with the unforgettable experience of seeing a Monarch emerge from its chrysalis, dry its wings and take its first flight. At the very least, you'll enjoy the sweet, summery smell of milkweed flowers next season.

For more information about saving the Monarch:

<https://extension.psu.edu/programs/master-gardener/counties/lackawanna/news/2015/help-save-the-monarch-butterfly>

For ideas on growing milkweed: <https://extension.psu.edu/monarchs-and-milkweed>



Plant native flowering plants to attract — and help save — the Monarch butterfly.