

Local Organic Garden Center is Working to Help Save Monarch Butterflies July 29, 2016

There is magic happening at Natureworks Organic Garden Center in Northford, CT. Inside the store, there are over 100 monarch butterfly caterpillars and eggs being raised. More are being collected and brought in every day. Their magical life cycle is on display for all to see this summer and fall.

Did you know that only 2 out of every 100 monarch eggs survives in the wild to become a butterfly? They are eaten by other insects at all stages of their metamorphosis. The monarch butterfly population has plummeted in the past decade due to loss of habitat and the use of poisonous insecticides. Natureworks is doing all that it can to reverse this trend.

All butterflies need two types of plants. The first is the larval plant food. This is the plant that the female butterfly lays its eggs on. The caterpillars can only eat the larval food plant. For monarchs, it's milkweed and other species/varieties of the genus *Asclepias*. Without the larval food plants, the butterfly cannot reproduce. Milkweed is unfortunately considered a weed and has been systematically eliminated from farm fields and meadows. Natureworks not only has hundreds of milkweed plants growing in their gardens, they also sell organic milkweed seedlings.

Why organic? Monarch caterpillars are extremely sensitive to environmental toxins. While raising the caterpillars, Natureworks employees must handle them in all life stages. Their rearing boxes must be cleaned of frass and new milkweed leaves added once or twice a day. Hands must be washed clean of sunscreen and any other substances that may contain chemicals. Caterpillars will die with even the smallest contact with these artificial substances. Even cleaning a rearing cage after petting a dog who is wearing flea/tick repellent will poison the caterpillars. They are so sensitive that even organic sprays can harm them. Raising monarchs demands a commitment to clean, safe gardening practices.

Flowers are the second type of plant that all butterflies require for nectar. That is the easiest part of butterfly gardening, as so many of our summer perennials and flowering shrubs are beloved by monarch butterflies. A few of their favorite native perennials to nectar on are Coneflowers, Joe Pye Weed, Asters, Bee Balm and Goldenrod.

In 2015, Natureworks began their obsession with raising monarchs. In the course of 3 months, they successfully raised and released 214 monarch butterflies. They offered many workshops on monarch butterflies and visitors were fascinated by the butterflies in all life stages on display each day at the store. Many lessons were learned about the process, and this year, the Natureworks staff is already off to a great start.

Monarch season in Connecticut can vary. In 2015, eggs and caterpillars were found at Natureworks in early June. This year, it wasn't until July 12th that Diane St. John, the manager of Natureworks was in her Durham home where a female monarch caught her eye. She watched as it began laying eggs on a flat of common milkweed seedlings on her potting bench. It then proceeded to lay eggs on butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*) and other *Asclepias* varieties in her yard. Between July 12th and July 13th, Diane and her 11-year-old son collected 86 eggs and 2 tiny caterpillars.

Diane St. John brought the eggs to Natureworks and they are now being raised by the staff. Bug boxes are used to raise them. As they change from egg to tiny caterpillar to larger caterpillar, their boxes are cleaned and fresh milkweed leaves and clean, unscented paper towels are placed in the boxes once or twice a day. The caterpillars eventually crawl up to the top of the box, hang upside down, and form a chrysalis. The chrysalis eventually becomes a butterfly. At that point, there is a "release ceremony" and anyone who happens to be visiting the garden center on that day joins the celebration.

The numbers at the store continue to rise as new eggs are collected around the nursery gardens every day. Because so many eggs were collected at the same time, the monarch butterflies in that grouping will all be born at once. They don't know exactly when it will be, but once they're born, the release ceremony will be amazing!

Track the daily rearing of the Natureworks monarchs on Facebook. If you have questions about monarchs, plants and organic gardening, visit Natureworks in Northford, CT. Join the growing movement to protect the monarch butterfly!

We look forward to the monarch season which starts mid-summer 2017!