



Critters in Our Backyard: Monarch Butterfly

by Carol Ellis

The end of hurricane season signals a few traditions at our home. First, we take down the hurricane shutters and second we call the screen enclosure repairman, to replace any frayed, loose or "holey" panels caused by golfers whose drives were not so straight.

Early evening after the screens were repaired, I noticed there was now a lone Monarch butterfly trapped inside the screen enclosure. It must have flown in while a screen panel was out. The next morning, I saw another monarch butterfly outside the screen enclosure, hover-



ing nearby as the trapped butterfly inside was searching for an exit. I got a ladder, reached up to gently grab the butterfly's closed wings, and released it outside. Immediately, his/her friend rushed to its side, and they tootled around the backyard all afternoon, happily reunited.

With its iconic orange and black markings, the Monarch Butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*) is one of the most recognizable butterfly species in North America and is known for its impressive long-distance migration, and is a candidate under the Endangered Species Act. The 2,500 mile Monarch butterfly migration starts in Canada in early Fall. The group living east of the Rocky Mountains migrates south to Central Mexico while those living west of the Rockies migrate to southern

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California. Both locations have the montane oyamel fir and native pine forests.

Butterfly gardens are beautiful spaces full of colorful fluttering butterflies. I plant flowers and also choose native trees to provide a source of nectar for the butterflies, as well as to serve as host plants for the caterpillars.

There are Monarchs in my backyard year round. According to experts, our Florida Monarchs are a different subspecies and they don't migrate.

Tropical milkweed (*Asclepias curassavica*), a native to Mexico, can be found in most garden



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stores, and Monarch butterflies are really attracted to it. It is also known as butterfly weed, milkweed, or silkweed, and it produces bunches of orange, yellow, and red tubular blooms for months.

With its ability to tolerate the hot sun and sandy soil in the Florida Keys, the Giant Milkweed (*Calotropis gigantea*), also known as Crown Flower, is a hardy plant that just wants to live. "Giant"... it grew in four months to about five feet, and just as I was ready to cut it back, the caterpillars appeared. Milkweed is the only food the larva can eat, but it eats enough to increase its weight 2,700 times in just two weeks. New gardeners are often shocked when they see their beautiful plants all of a sudden just a couple sticks

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The caterpillars feeding on the Tropical Milkweed appear more yellowish/orange with black.

after the caterpillars have eaten every green and flowering piece of it. Luckily, the milkweeds don't die... they are accustomed to providing food, and soon the leaves are back, and the silky seed pods open and are released in the air, to land where they may, thereby creating more plants.

Milkweed is a host plant for a number of pollinators, so use of pesticides on milkweed is discouraged. Aphids can be a problem, that can be fixed with a strong blast of water from the hose... or let the ladybugs, present in a healthy, balanced environment, take care of it.

With both types of milkweed in my garden, I observed the caterpillars



feeding on the Giant milkweed appear more white with black coloration, as opposed to the caterpillars feeding on the tropical milkweed, who appear more yellowish/orange with black. Speculation on my part perhaps? Could it be cater-



Monarch butterflies are really attracted to Tropical Milkweed.



To learn more about our butterflies, or provide support, check out the Miami Blue Chapter of the NABA. (<https://miamiblue.org/>)

The butterfly lays its eggs on the new growth of the Giant Milkweed.

pillars, as do humans abide by the rule: "you are what you eat"?

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Currently a Master Gardener volunteer, Carol has a degree in Journalism from the University of Florida and is the resident photographer /artist at Ocean Reef Club.



Cages for caterpillars?

There are citizen scientists who have screen mesh houses, where they observe the lifecycle from egg, to caterpillar, pupate, to emerging butterfly. As long as there is a clean environment, with enough fresh plant material for food they are fine. More than just science, it is a way of boosting the population of a certain species.



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