Saving monarch butterflies gets boost from milkweed planted in Chicago area

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Eight-year-old Allison Penley can count on one hand the number of times she's seen a monarch butterfly on a flower in her backyard. It's not many — just two.

That's not acceptable for the third-grader from Glen Ellyn. It's also not for many adults in communities throughout the Chicago area.

Unlike Allison, they can remember seeing the winged insect in abundance during their childhoods. They prize the orange-and-black creature for its beauty and annual feat of migration across thousands of miles from the U.S. and Canada to Mexico.

"It's the only butterfly that's known to migrate," said Sandy Fejt, education site manager at the Willowbrook Wildlife Center in Glen Ellyn. "It goes across borders, which is amazing."

The butterfly population has declined dramatically in the past two decades. The total area covered by monarch colonies overwintering in Mexico has dropped from about 45 acres in 1996-97 to about 3.2 acres in 2014-15, according to the Monarch Joint Venture. The partnership is made up of federal and state agencies, non-governmental organizations and academic programs.

They and others are working together to support and coordinate efforts to protect the monarch migration across the lower 48 states.

Each fall, monarchs travel 1,200 to 2,800 miles or more from the United States and Canada to central Mexico, where they hibernate in mountain forests and where a less-brutal climate allows them a better chance to survive.

In the spring, monarchs begin to return, and residents of Illinois should begin spotting them about now.

Ann Marie Holtrop, acting chief for the Illinois Department of Natural Resources' division of Natural Heritage, said the monarch is regarded fondly by many people.

"Because monarchs are so charismatic and easily identifiable, people noticed when they started to decline," Holtrop said. "The monarch butterfly is our Illinois state insect, and plays an important role in pollination."

Loss of the milkweed plant, the only food source for monarch caterpillars, combined with habitat loss in their overwintering locations in Mexico, development and recent extreme weather have taken a toll on their populations, experts say.

Monarchs lay eggs on milkweed. Caterpillars need the plant because it's the only plant they eat. But the once-common plant has dwindled because of numerous threats, including use of herbicides, development and farming.

Monarch way stations, or rest stops, are places where milkweed and nectar flowers are planted to help sustain the butterflies along their journey.

Students at Ben Franklin School in Glen Ellyn, where Allison attends, approached the village's Environmental Commission in 2014 and asked members to address the problem.

The village responded by naming 2015 the Year of the Monarch and has hung banners featuring the butterfly throughout town. On June 20, the village and Glen Ellyn Park District will plant milkweed at a municipal parking lot and in a park. The village has set a long-term goal of planting milkweed in 100 public and private gardens throughout the village. It will give away free milkweed plants at the June 20 event.

"This is about pride. Civic pride and helping to save a part of nature," said Adam Kreuzer, chairman of the Environmental Commission.

Glen Ellyn's effort is far from the only one to save the butterfly. In Downers Grove, Lyman Woods, a 135-acre natural area operated by the Downers Grove Park District, has planted milkweed and is adding more. A Girl Scout troop recently spread milkweed seeds in the woods.

Staff at the center also remove monarch eggs from the flowers and take them inside to nurture and better ensure their chances of survival. The small white eggs are found on the underside of the milkweed.

"Any time we pass a milkweed, we see if there are eggs there," said Shannon Forsythe, manager of natural resources and interpretive services at Lyman Woods.

In Lombard, representatives of the Lombard Garden Club recently appealed to the Park District to plant butterfly weed and swamp milkweed in ornamental beds, to add swamp milkweed to natural, unmowed areas and to better maintain a monarch way station at Terrace View Park.

"There are few problems that can be solved by planting flowers," said garden club member Lonnie Morris. "This is one of them."

The state also has launched efforts to help save the monarchs.

At last year's state fair, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources hosted "Monarch Mania," which featured exhibits, a live monarch and educational videos about the butterfly and its falling numbers. From August through February, the department distributed 10,600 packets of common milkweed.

The theme of this year's state fair Aug. 14- 23 will be "Habitat Helpers," and will focus on the monarch, bees and other pollinators.

Efforts are being made on a regional level too.

The Forest Preserve District of Cook County has planted milkweed at many of its properties, including Crabtree Nature Center in Barrington Hills, the Little Red Schoolhouse Nature Center in Willow Springs, Sagawau Environmental Learning Center in Lemont, and River Trail Nature Center in Northbrook.

In Bloom Township in Chicago Heights, highway commissioner Joe Stanfa has taken the effort to save the monarch to heart. He grew up near a forest preserve and recalls encountering the insect in multitudes.

"I saw them all the time," he said.

Stanfa also was entranced by the butterfly's migration after seeing a film about it at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago. He is encouraging the 29 townships in Cook County and others throughout the state to plant milkweed, along with nectar plants, along their roadways.

"It's sort of like Illinois could be the superhighway for these little guys," he said.

He said most of the highway commissioners in Cook County will have plantings done by the end of summer. He plans to plant milkweed and nectar flowers in a patch at Interurban Lane near Halsted Street in Chicago Heights by the end of June.

He, and other townships, also have placed cardboard boxes in their offices where people can pick up milkweed seeds.

Garden Clubs of Illinois Inc. is working with Stanfa to supply those seeds as part of its Milkweed for Monarchs program. They will send a packet of milkweed seeds for $2 to anyone who asks.

Milkweed, which is a flower, can be hard to track down.

"It's very difficult to find milkweed online," said Kay MacNeil, a member of the Garden Clubs of Illinois. "It wasn't a plant that people sought prior to this."

There are three types of milkweed where monarchs lay eggs. Common milkweed, which is invasive, and swamp milkweed and butterfly weed, which are not.

"It's considered a native plant. But for a lot of people, it's been considered a weed," said Fejt of the Willowbrook Wildlife Center. "Most of our residents like a crisp, neater garden. Once the pods of the (common milkweed) open up, it looks a bit weedier."

Butterfly weed, which produces a short orange flower, is an alternative that gardeners might find more attractive. It will be distributed at the Glen Ellyn planting event. "It grows to be about 1 or 2 feet tall, and it's beautiful and showy," Fejt said.

Karen Brittain, conservation chairman of the Lombard Garden Club, said she hopes all of the efforts to save the monarch will help it thrive again.

"I feel that we share the Earth with all people and all creatures," she said. "If I can do something to help the butterflies in trouble — why not?"

As part of a group of students who spurred Glen Ellyn officials to make efforts to save the monarch, Allison is happy to see that others are embracing the project to save them.

"I feel really good that monarchs are probably going to make a comeback," she said. "And that lots of people want to help."

She hopes to see many of the insects flitting through her backyard — many more than the two she has spotted in the past eight years.

That's something that Stanfa also hopes for too.

"The things we got to see — I hope the kids of tomorrow get to see them too."

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