

HOW TO BECOME THE MOTHER OF A BUTTERFLY...YES, YOU!!!!

By Kay MacNeil, Garden Clubs of IL Butterfly Chairman

Raising and Releasing Butterflies: The following information is a quickie overview. You'll want to learn More and you'll go to the library or internet for that.

To Attract and Find Monarch Caterpillars: You Need Milkweeds. Monarchs Only lay their eggs on milkweed plants. No milkweeds, no monarch caterpillars. In the Midwest you will want to plant the three primary milkweeds.



Common milkweed (*asclepias syriaca*)—This plant looks like a 4' rubber tree plant and has the big seed pods that you may have released fluff and seed from as a kid. Flowers are pink umbels and fragrant. It can be invasive! Plant in wild unmowed areas.

For the front of your perennial bed, plant Swamp milkweed (*asclepias incarnata*) It is pink. The white form is called Ice Ballet. Lovely! Butterfly weed (*asclepias tuberosa*) is orange. These are All perennial. These two are about 3' tall and can go in the front of the border. There are other milkweeds suitable for the Midwest and tropical milkweed. Check those library books.

The easiest caterpillars to raise are monarchs and swallowtails. Monarchs: Remember. Their eggs are only found on milkweed. The female curls her abdomen under the edge of the leaf and tacks a whitish egg the size of a period on this page under the leaf. You can see it. Several days later it hatches into a caterpillar and is a “comma” on this page. Each female lays one egg per plant so there is enough food for the caterpillars. You'll need more than one milkweed plant.

Egg: 4-6 days. Caterpillar 2-3 weeks. Chrysalis 5-15 days. The monarch chrysalis is a beautiful green with a gold dotted line around it horizontally. It will turn dark and you can see the orange and black colors the day before the butterfly is ready to come out.

Black Swallowtails: To attract swallowtails, plant dill (A bunch of Dollar Store packets of seed work), fennel in red or green and curly parsley. Both the fennel and dill will reseed in their “spot” and will not need replanting every year. Curly parsley is an annual and will have to be purchased every year. Of course, you will mince the fennel and dill ferns into your salad for a different, yummy flavor. Queen Anne's Lace is a host plant but a voracious seeder, not for a cultivated perennial bed. Just watch for a yellow egg the size of a period on this page. It can be anywhere on the plant.

Egg: 4-10 days. Caterpillar 3-4 weeks. Chrysalis 10-20 days. These butterflies over winter in Illinois so unless you want to keep track of them in the garage for the winter, stop bringing in caterpillars by the end of August so you don't have to store them.

All butterflies need a mix of native plants for their food or “nectaring.” Joe Pye weed, liatris, lead plant, purple cone flowers, rudbeckias, asters, perennial ageratum (a little invasive.)—all good choices.

Other swallowtails and host plants you can grow in your yard: Pipe vine swallowtail-Dutchman’s pipe vine (a little invasive!) Zebra swallowtail-pawpaw tree. (I have never seen a zebra!) Spicebush swallowtail-Spice bush. Tiger (yellow) swallowtail-Tulip tree.

Remember: Most butterflies love butterfly bush for food (nectar) but it is not native and no butterfly lays its eggs on that plant.

You’ve found a monarch caterpillar and now, What To Do With It?!?! Select your container—an old terrarium, a giant plastic snack container—need a flat bottom and plenty of space. Screening or netting for the top of the container held with a rubber band or something tight—No escapees, please. A flower tube and a small glass to hold your milkweed plant cuttings. Milkweed goes in the tube of water, tube goes in glass, held upright. A random stick for the chrysalis although they always seem to hang on the screening or some where else.

Keep bringing in milkweed until the caterpillar stops eating and makes its chrysalis. Always make sure you have plenty of milkweed leaves. They love to eat at night and you don’t want hungry caterpillars. When transferring caterpillars to new milkweed, clean your container. Take a tissue and clean out the frass (caterpillar poop.) The caterpillar sometimes pauses in its eating to molt and there is usually a one day pause when it thinks about making a hanging “J” before it does it. Sometimes they race around the bottom of the container like a NASCAR driver.

I always like to feed the caterpillar the same variety of milkweed that I found him on. Wipe down the leaves with your hand or actually run them under water. There can be bad bacteria on the leaves that will harm the caterpillar.

Once it’s a chrysalis, remove the milkweed and be patient. Butterflies usually emerge in the AM. Let it pump all the juice out of its body until it is thin bodied and its wings are unfolded and look correct. If a lot of fluttering starts inside the jar, it is ready for release. The warmth of mid-day is best for release. Go outside. Stick your hand in the jar and the butterfly climbs up. Sometimes it sits for a bit, sometimes it just flies off. Look for the black dots that denote a male butterfly on the hind wings. Aren’t You PROUD?!?!?

Your butterfly’s been released, so wash out your container with soap and water and a little Clorax. Rinse and dry well. You’re ready to try again.

It’s fun to keep a little journal and keep track of your releases and results from year to year.

Not every butterfly works out. I have had little caterpillars just stop eating. I’ve had “J”s fall to the bottom of the container for no reason. I’ve had a chrysalis turn black after the first day. I’ve had butterflies not unfold correctly. I put them outside and leave it to nature.

Questions? Or to request information on the Garden Clubs of Illinois Milkweed For Monarchs program, Call Chairman Kay MacNeil 815-469-1294 or kaymac60423@yahoo.com Also see www.SaveOurMonarchs.org to order your free Swamp Milkweed Seed packet.