

Native Milkweeds can Save Monarch Population

Every November 33 million monarch butterflies migrate up to 2,800 miles to Mexico for their winter hibernation, escaping the freezing winter temperatures in the United States. For several months, they'll take shelter in oyamel fir trees, returning to the same tree every year.

However, in recent years, scientists have noticed the monarch population to be declining at a rapid rate. Identified relative to the number of acres they inhabit during their seasonal hibernation, monarchs have decreased from 44.5 acres in 1996 to an alarming 1.65 acres in 2013. According to research conducted in December 2012 and 2013 by the World Wildlife Fund, the monarch population has dropped by an alarming 44 percent in the last year alone.

Why are the monarchs vanishing? As their forests are cut down for illegal logging, the monarchs get wet in the tropic conditions and lose their resistance to the below freezing temperatures, according to Lincoln Brower, professor of Biology and a monarch expert at Sweet Briar College. In recent years, scientists including Brower credit an even bigger problem caused by deforestation: the loss of the monarch's breeding habitats.

According to World Wildlife Fund, the monarchs migrate back to the United States in March and enter their spring and summer breeding areas, only to find that the milkweed plants on which they lay their eggs have been cleared by development, agriculture expansion, and the use of poisonous herbicides.

According to Peter Lehner, Executive Director of the Natural Resources Defense Council, 60 percent of milkweed has been eliminated from the ecosystem, a vast reduction in the number of host plants available for the caterpillars to develop on. Milkweed is the only food monarch caterpillars will eat.

Habitat restoration efforts are in full swing, and the ENC has joined in the effort to restore monarch populations by planting locally appropriate native milkweed. Not only are monarchs well adapted to the plant, but locally native milkweeds – *Asclepias californica*, *Asclepias eriocarpa*, and *Asclepias fascicularis* – become dormant and grow back at the right time — when monarchs have returned to the area. It is important to note that planting non-native milkweed is unwise, as it can disrupt migratory cycles and make monarchs more susceptible to parasites.



Asclepias fascicularis, narrow leaved milkweed, is native to Orange County



Asclepias californica, California milkweed, is native to Orange County

