

The Milkweed Conundrum

To Cut or Not To Cut?...What's Best for Monarchs

1. Monarch habitat is being destroyed in Mexico/Central America (the traditional winter home of migrating monarchs) primarily by deforestation. In the US, development and herbicide usage on crops, which destroys all weeds, including milkweeds (*Asclepias*), are thought to be the primary causes of habitat loss.
2. Gardeners have stepped up to fill the void by planting milkweeds in their gardens. There are over 20 types of milkweed that are native to the US, and 11 that are native to Nassau County (see list below).
3. The easiest milkweed to mass produce is not native to the US. Tropical milkweed (*Asclepias curassavica*), is native to Central America and has naturalized through introduction in the US. It is the most readily available at nurseries. It is a lovely, dependable plant that flowers non-stop, and makes a great garden plant...the butterflies it attracts are an added bonus.
4. In northern US climates, tropical milkweed dies back with the cold weather. In parts of Florida, Texas, and California, the plant stands through winter. Sometimes it makes it through a mild winter here in Nassau County, and therein lies the conundrum for us.
5. Since it's thought that the monarchs we see here in our Nassau County gardens are non-migrating, year-round residents of Florida we don't have to worry about whether year-round availability of tropical milkweed might encourage monarchs to stay put and not complete their journey to Mexico for over-wintering.
6. However, there's a nasty little protozoan parasite called "Oe" (*Ophryocystis elektroscirrha*) that somehow (unknown) infects almost all monarchs, but studies have shown the heaviest infestations are among the non-migrating monarchs along the US east coast.
7. It's thought that perhaps an infected adult, carrying Oe, stops to lay eggs on milkweed and drops protozoa on the leaves. Native milkweeds die back in winter, even here in Nassau County, coming up clean and Oe-free again in Spring. If tropical milkweed stands through winter, the load of Oe on the plant continues to build. When these leaves are ingested by monarch caterpillars, they have a greater chance of becoming infected. Monarchs with heavy protozoa loads have various deformities and shortened lifespans.
8. Suggested solutions for the problem: 1) Plant only native milkweeds, 2) Cut all tropical milkweed to 6" in Fall, 3) Cut 1/3 back to 6" every 4 months, forcing new (clean) growth. Option 3 allows for SOME milkweed to be available for hungry babies at all times, while renewing clean growth throughout the year.

Milkweeds Native to Nassau County: All are Genus: *Asclepias*

Species: *cinera*, *connivens*, *humistrata*, *lanceolata*, *longifolia*, *michauxii*, *pedicellata*, *perennis*, *tomentosa*, *tuberosa*, *viridula*

Google *Asclepias cinera* (etc) and you'll see photos and more info on each. Some of these are easily grown from seed.

Further reading, if you're interested:

<https://davesgarden.com/guides/articles/view/4850>

<http://nababutterfly.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Tropical-Milkweed.pdf>

<http://dnr.wi.gov/wnrmap/2017/08/Monarchs.PDF>

