

## Milkweeds for Monarchs

### AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

If there is one truly wild creature that it seems almost everyone recognizes, it is the monarch butterfly. The classic orange and black wings of this butterfly have a very high recognition rate among school age children and adults alike. Most folks have also heard about concerns about the monarch because of dropping, rapidly dropping, population numbers. In an average recent year, the population has been estimated at 300 million. While not quite up to the record number of one billion that were recorded in 1996, it's still a respectable number. In recent years the numbers were dropping severely and red flags were going up everywhere last year when the over wintering count fell to a concerning 55 million.

While 55 million sounds like a lot of butterflies, when you compare it to those other two numbers, it is a mere pittance! Human beings are simple. When there's a problem they like to be able to point a figure and say, "There's the problem." Mother Nature is rarely simply. Ecosystems are complex and seemingly unrelated factors can actually be closely tied together. In the case of the monarch, people may want to point to GMO crops as THE problem. They may want to point to disturbance in the wintering areas as THE problem. They may want to point to pesticides everywhere as THE problem. But the reality is that it's more complex than that and some of those may not actually be culprits.

One of the things that no one can control is the weather. When there is heat and drought, as we had in several recent summers, it impacts everything. It impacts insects, it impacts birds, it impacts plants. Fewer blossoms means less nectar for butterflies, bees and hummingbirds all. Many threats are large scale threats that we can't do anything about. The weather is something that none of us can do anything about. But food source, especially for the monarch caterpillars, is something that we can address by planting milkweed in our flower beds or perennial flower gardens!

Monarch caterpillars feed on milkweeds. Period. That is it. Milkweeds used to be very common. In fact the species known as common milkweed, *Asclepias syriaca*, could at times be a real weed problem in some fields. Most milkweeds are perennials and hard to control with conventional herbicides, but glyphosate (a.k.a. Roundup) worked very effectively on it!

There are actually close to a dozen species of milkweed native to the northern Flint Hills. Of those, six or seven are adapted to planting in garden and wildflower settings. The generally accepted list of milkweed species to consider planting include: swamp (*Asclepias incarnata*), common (*A. syriaca*), butterfly (*A. tuberosa*), smooth (*A. sullivantii*), green (*A. hirtella*), whorled (*A. verticillata*) and green antelopehorn (*A. viridis*). Of these, I have had the best luck growing the first three, swamp, common and butterfly. The best time to plant these would be late April and early May.

As I said before, these are perennial plants and they need to be planted either by seed or by young seedlings. Fortunately once they are established, they are pretty resilient. The adults will feed on the milkweed flowers and many other flower species, but the caterpillars HAVE to have milkweed to feed on. Therefore it is also important that you never spray the milkweeds with insecticide to control other insects!

You can plant a few, you can plant an acre. The more you plant, the more monarchs you will see. So this spring, do something wild and something fun; plant some milkweeds for the monarchs!