

# Observations From a Butterfly Garden

*By Christine Ramoski, Fairfax Master Gardener*

I am in awe of nature. Even when I'm observing a natural phenomenon with a group of people, I feel as though I am being granted a private viewing. And, I'll be honest, I don't always share that view with my immediate peers, who often comment that the smile that creeps across my face has the look of a Cheshire cat with a secret.

For example, how can I convey to my peers the joy of having an 8 year old, dressed in a Jasmine Halloween costume, standing near my butterfly garden shouting, "Do you know that you have Monarchs in your garden?" Taking the time to walk over and find out what she knew about Monarchs, I was presented with the comment, "I learned about them in school, but perhaps we can talk some other time because I have to join the neighborhood hotdog party before trick-or-treating starts."

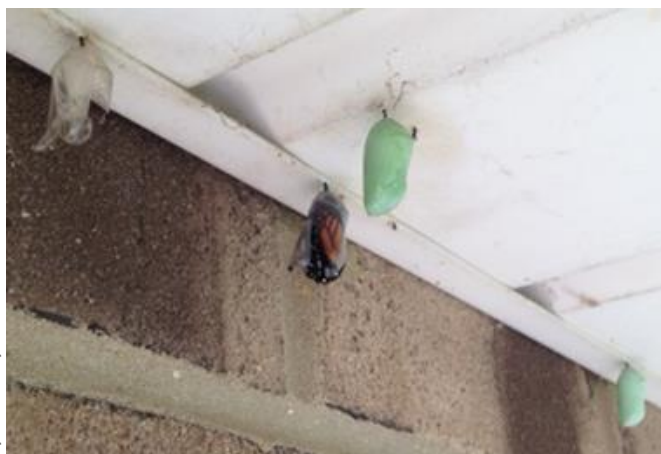
Jasmine may not have been aware that on June 27, 2007, Canada, Mexico, and the United States collaborated to develop the North American Monarch Conservation Plan (NAMCP). The joint effort is likely the reason why today's US school children are exposed to the Monarch lifecycle. I invite you to educate yourself more on the Monarchs plight and how the human race is trying to reverse our impact to this creature.



*photo: by author*

*Mating Monarchs with hovering observer*

How did my butterfly fascination start? I will admit I was not aware of the NAMCP at the time I got into supporting the Monarch. I just happen to like bugs in general, and thought it would be fun to challenge myself to attract butterflies to my yard? One year, without much planning, I planted a butterfly bush (Buddleia). Butterflies showed up that same year. The next year, I added a puddling pool, using a large red clay watering dish with some sand, clay, and river stones. I observed the butterflies drinking from the moist earth and basking on the stones. What an easy and cheap form of entertainment! My next observation was that I would often find large caterpillars on my dill and parsley plants. I took the time to investigate before taking any action and recognized the caterpillars were actually the larvae of various swallowtail butterflies.



*photo: by author*

*Monarch chrysalises in various stages of development*

Next, I contracted the fever of exploring native plants and understanding the importance of host plants. I spent time determining what host plants would bring the best variety of butterflies to my garden. Eventually, it only made sense that I try to attract the Monarch to my garden. I planted the host plant, milkweed (Asclepias), and the Monarchs came. Each year I spend a little more time observing, raising, and encouraging the Monarchs in my yard. Each year I spend less time planting. Since I practice manual extraction as a weed control, I don't have to re-establish most of my annual flowers; they reseed themselves. Much of what comes up

in my yard each year (host and as well as nectar plants) do not cost me any money, and my yard is full of color.

Each year in June I try to spot the first adult Monarch before the date I spotted one the prior year. Each year, starting in August, I start looking for Monarch chrysalises around my yard, counting them, hoping to have more than the previous year. September is a busy month with several adult Monarchs hatching each day. This past year I had over 60 chrysalises attached to the house siding in easy view.

As I was pruning this February, I was thrilled to see how many more were hidden throughout the yard as the bare tree and shrub structures were void of leaves. The Monarch chrysalises and the praying mantis egg sacks were abundant. For the chrysalises that did not hatch out, the frost nipped those tiny lives; however, the praying mantis egg sacks will hatch as the spring weather warms. These artifacts in my yard are proof that nature balances itself. The mantises are 5 - 6 inches long, and I have no doubt some of those Monarch larvae, and the absence of synthetic insecticides in my land management practice, contributes to their size. I am, however, thankful that I have not had the experience of witnessing one of these meals taking place.

My last observation is the extent to which neighbors take interest of my butterfly garden. It is a great conversation starter, and it is flattering to have neighbors hovering around the sidewalk gardens. Because my intent is to attract wildlife, my gardens are not as tidy as some gardeners might like. It does not seem to matter to my neighbors. In fact, it is the activity of my garden that keeps my neighbors' interest. I often encourage well-behaved visitors to walk through the yard, sharing with them something new that occurs every day in the garden.

I have even learned to laugh when I find a case of small theft in my garden. Despite how easy it is to attract Monarchs, some folks don't want to wait or take the effort to plant a seed. I have often come upon a cut milkweed that had an established larva removed from my yard. What I hope the human bandit understands is that it takes about two whole milkweed plants to get that caterpillar to the state in which it is ready to leave the host and form a chrysalis. Raising Monarchs outside of the garden can become a large obligation rather quickly.

See my story, *A Beginner's Guide to Butterfly Gardens*, for more information about starting your own butterfly garden.

### Resources

North American Monarch Conservation Plan, Commission for Environmental Cooperation  
Monarch Larva Monitoring Project, University of Minnesota  
Pollinator Partnership fueling station  
Pollinator Partnership zip code



*Adult praying mantis*

photo: by author