

Zoo to You column for Garden City Telegram

By Kristi Newland, Zoo Director

2 March 2017

Topic: Planting to Help Butterflies

The fluttering of a butterfly can take a child on a flight of imagination. Butterflies are also important pollinators, along with bees, moths, bats and birds. While dining on the nectar of a wildflower they are also pollinating the flower (leaving behind pollen picked up at another flower and picking up more pollen to carry on to another). This gives them a very important role in agriculture. Butterflies also serve as an indicator species, the “canary in the coal mine,” for our ecosystem. If the butterflies are having trouble, it’s a signal that something in the ecosystem is out of whack.

Butterflies and other pollinators are indeed facing a problem. With spring around the corner, this is the perfect time of year for you to put in action some simple steps to help. A big part of the problem butterflies are facing is a lack of habitat. As human beings have developed the land around them, the plants many of the pollinators count on are disappearing. Consider the monarch butterfly. In North America, the population of monarch butterflies has drastically dropped by 90% over the last 20 years. Monarch butterflies feed on the nectar of many flowers, but they need specific types of milkweed plants to continue their lifecycle. Milkweed plants are where monarchs lay their eggs. Milkweed is basically the exclusive food for the monarch caterpillar (the larval stage of the monarch butterfly); it’s the host plant for the caterpillar. Eating milkweed also makes the monarch taste terrible to many possible predators, so the milkweed sustains the baby and protects the adults. Without milkweed the monarch butterfly population continues to decline.

Spring is approaching and many of us are considering what to plant in our yards. How about some butterfly-friendly plants? Many of us already have butterfly bushes and other nectar producing plants in our yards but as mentioned earlier, without milkweed, the environment is incomplete. Two of the milkweed plants recommended for our region are showy milkweed and whorled milkweed. Milkweed does come in different colors and with a range of tolerances for shade and preference for dry or wet soil so there are a number of options.

Milkweed plants and seeds can be purchased through a number of local or online garden suppliers as well as organizations supporting butterfly conservation (Monarch Butterfly Garden, Save our Monarchs,

etc..). More information about monarch butterflies can be found through The Xerces Society, Monarch Watch and National Wildlife Federation.

By the way, while you're planning, don't forget it's also helpful to provide a shallow source of clean water for the butterflies too. I can't imagine the world without butterflies, so I plan on planting milkweed as well as some additional nectar plants in my yard this year. I hope you'll join me in giving butterflies a helping hand.