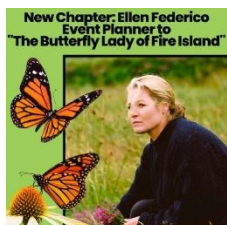


WELCOME, MONARCHS!

By Ronnie Brancazio



A little over a year ago, this was just an idea “fluttering around” in our minds – now, it’s a growing, thriving Monarch Butterfly Garden right here at Planting Fields Arboretum, conceived, created and maintained by Long Island Hort!



This all began with a fascinating and moving Speaker Presentation by Ellen Federico, The Butterfly Lady, about Monarchs and the urgent need to protect and sustain them as they face so many environmental threats.

Some LIHS members suggested that we create our own Monarch Garden at PFA, and the idea was presented to Vinnie Simeone, Director of the Arboretum. We were allocated a large area of mixed-grass prairie, not far from the Burns Center, and a section of this area was mowed and prepared for our use by PFA staff.

A MONARCH BUTTERFLY GARDEN COMMITTEE was formed, with over 20 enthusiastic volunteers! Subcommittees were formed to work on researching appropriate plants and creating a garden design; to purchase plants, do the actual planting layout, prepare the plot, and plant; and then to do the ongoing, hard work of maintaining the plantings by watering, weeding, and grooming. Committees were also formed to work on Signage, Publicity, and Funding.

Over the past year, A LOT HAS HAPPENED! The first steps were consulting with Ellen F. and doing a great deal of research to select native perennials which grow well in our region, have similar care needs, and attract Monarchs. Milkweed is the essential plant since Monarchs only lay their eggs on milkweed and it is the only plant their caterpillars feed on, but a variety of flowering plants are needed to provide nectar as nourishment for the adult butterflies.

The next step was to come up with a garden design having both visual appeal and a practical layout for planting and maintenance. The group decided to set up a four-year-plan, ultimately creating a 40' x 60' garden, divided into quadrants, with inviting paths meandering through each. The first quadrant was planted this year, and an additional one will be created each year over the next three years - in order to keep things “manageable” and to learn and improve as we go along.

A “Shopping List of plants was created, and many were purchased from commercial growers. However, many plants were donated by LIHS members from their own gardens, and many more were raised from seed (especially milkweeds) by members using all sorts of clever methods for winter sowing!

Next, the ground had to be prepared, and this meant laying sheets of carboard over the entire area to deter weeds and grasses, then raking a thick layer of mulch over this base; measuring and marking out the area for each type of plant using posts, string and tile markers; and then making a hole for each plant and carefully setting it in! Whew!

Once the garden was planted, we realized that “manageable” was an optimistic term, considering the many challenges we had to overcome in this first year:

- *Raccoons digging up plants to find yummy grubs? Every night!

- *Deer munching tasty flowers? Of course!

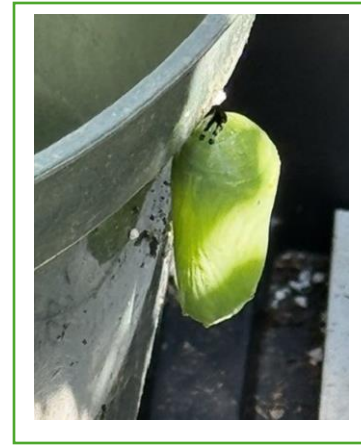
- * Weeds? Abundant!

- *Extreme weather? You bet!

But our intrepid team managed to find clever solutions and threw themselves into the very hard work of daily problem-solving, restoration, maintenance and care. We began with a motion-detecting camera which caught the culprits in the act. Next a bunch of raccoon deterrents were tried, but it wasn't until we covered the ground around the plants with tulle netting that the critters gave up – they hate walking on the stuff!

So far we're co-existing with the deer, but if the problem gets worse, we may have to consider fencing. We'd rather not!

And now that it's September, how is our Monarch Garden doing? It's not "perfect" – whatever is? But it is looking very good and had many colorful blooms. Most of the plants we chose grew well, with only a couple of disappointments, which will be replaced with known winners. And best of all, it has been visited by actual Monarchs, which laid their eggs on the milkweed, resulting in actual caterpillars, and one chrysalis has been observed so far! Very exciting!



If I were writing a GARDEN REPORT CARD, it would look like this:

Design: A+

Plant Selection: A

Late-Season Appearance: B+

Survival Against All Odds: A

Fulfilling its Purpose (Attracting Monarchs): B+

Team Effort: A+++

And in case you thought the Monarch Garden Committee would now take a break and relax – guess again! They are already hard at work preparing the ground in the second quadrant, deciding on the best plants and where to purchase them, and continuing the daily work of watering, weeding, and repairing any damage.

If you have not yet participated in this exciting project, it's never too late! More hands are always welcome, for tasks large or small. You may have native perennials growing in your home garden which are on the Needed Plant List and your plant donations would be most welcome. And once again, you can start milkweed seeds during the winter for spring transplanting, which is a fun winter activity.

You will learn more about all this at our September meeting, as well as having an opportunity to visit the Monarch Garden!