

Milkweeds for Monarchs: The St. Louis Butterfly Project

City Efforts To Entice “Flying Flowers” Take Flight

By *St. Louis Mayor Francis Slay*

St. Louis is at work cultivating the local return of a great migration of butterflies — most specifically, that of the Monarch. It doesn't take much to make a Monarch feel welcome, just a good meal and a safe place to lay their eggs and feed their larvae.

Butterflies are both a symbol of hope and a vehicle for positive change. Who doesn't smile when they see a butterfly? Research findings and mounting evidence supports the importance of connecting people with nature. Simply put, we are

hardwired to respond favorably to elements of the natural world. Studies are showing there are actual physical and psychological benefits to exposing people to nature — things like lowering stress and anger, reducing blood pressure, improving comfort, minimizing fear and improving overall happiness.

There are dozens of notable organizations working to help Monarch butterflies; St. Louis is partnering with some of them to bring these successes to the people at the local level and neighborhood scale. We launched “Milkweeds for Monarchs: The St. Louis Butterfly Project” for the benefits it will bring to plants, pollinators and people.

Monarchs play an important pollinator role in our ecosystem and agricultural system as they make their annual epic move from Canada to Mexico, and back again. But that migration is now a threatened biological phenomenon.



St. Louis Mayor Francis Slay



Left to right, Tracy Boaz with the Missouri Department of Conservation, St. Louis Mayor Francis Slay, Jim Miller with the Missouri Botanical Garden, and Ed Spevak of the St. Louis Zoo plant milkweeds for monarch butterfly habitats.

The skies once were thick with, as Walt Whitman put it, “Butterflies and butterflies, all sorts, white, yellow, brown, purple — now and then some gorgeous fellow flashing lazily by on wings like artists’ palette dabb’d with every color.”

I remember being about 13 years old or so, playing in Lindenwood Park in St. Louis and seeing clouds of Monarch butterflies all over the place. My friends and I marveled at their beauty and tried to catch a little bit of their magic. But, I’ve never seen that again in my life. I remember it so well, and I’d like to see it again.

Monarch populations, though, have declined 90 percent over the past two decades. The misuse of herbicides and insecticides has largely killed their habitat. But, we can contribute to its revival — each of us, with little effort, in our own yards and gardens. All it takes is to plant a square yard (or more) of a milkweed mix — hardy and handsome non-inva-

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sive weeds that are ideal hosts to caterpillars intent on metamorphosis. Monarch caterpillars can only feed on milkweed to grow and survive, so without milkweed, we would have no Monarch butterflies.

By planting milkweeds and a variety of nectar plants, you can help the Monarch butterfly as well as other pollinators like bumblebees. Conservation can start at home, at school, at work, or on any vacant lot.

City agencies are working together, joining the St. Louis Zoo, the Missouri Botanical Garden, Forest Park Forever, the Missouri Department of Conservation, and a growing cadre of neighborhood gardeners to establish, by the September 2014 migration, at least 50 city-sponsored milkweed gardens — at fire houses, police Area Stations and other public places — with residents establishing another 200, as part of the 250th Anniversary celebration of St. Louis's founding.

Launched on Earth Day 2014, this initiative already has met with an overwhelmingly positive response. It's a simple and tangible project that will translate into almost immediate results.

The St. Louis initiative is a modest but powerful part our city's Sustainability Plan, a comprehensive 260-page library of ideas developed through public engagement to increase economic, social and environmental opportunities. While the Plan has thousands of ways to enhance sustainability, I am prioritizing the city's implementation efforts on a list of 29 measurable action items, including several that will help improve the city's natural and built environment.

The purpose of the Milkweeds for Monarchs initiative is to reinforce in ways as sublime as the beauty of the butterfly the connections between peo-

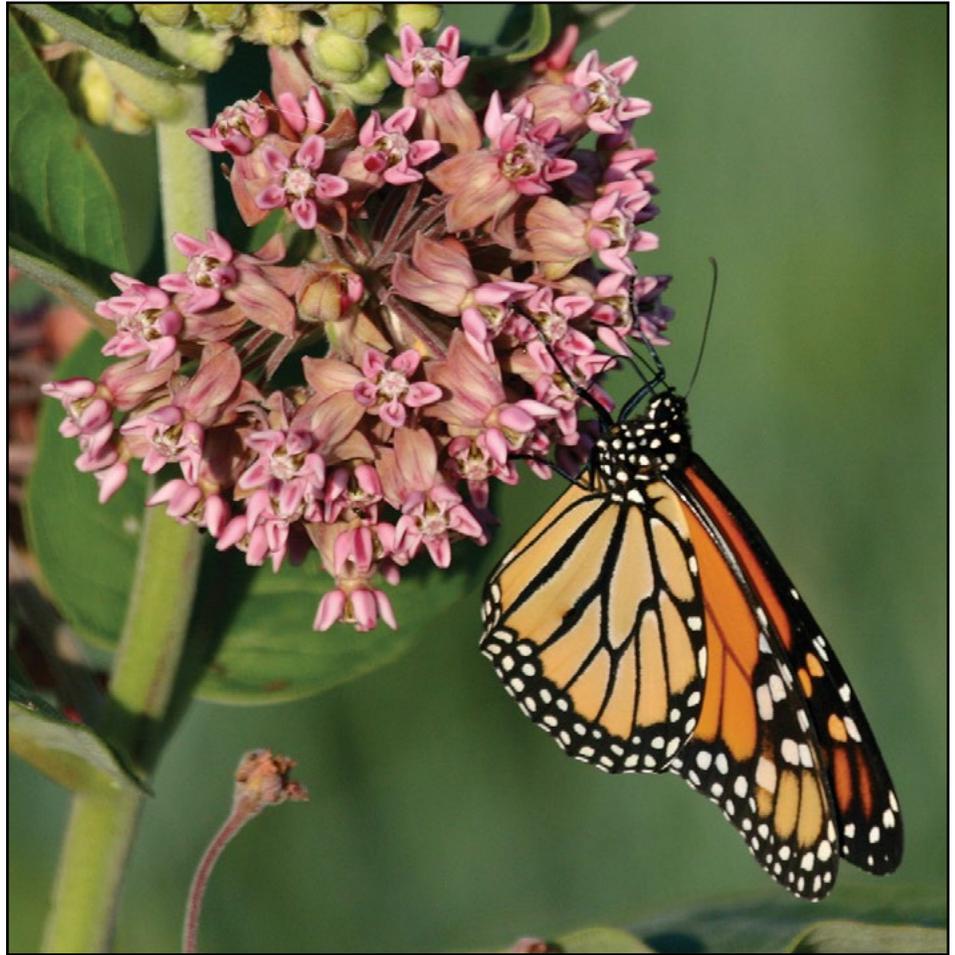


Photo by Monarch Watch

ple and urban natural resources and the joy of experiencing biodiversity in our everyday lives.

St. Louis is spearheading this effort to help grow the Monarch population in ways that people can experience them, and I hope other cities across the country will join us — both for the butterflies and the people who see them.

We owe butterflies plenty. In St. Louis, our hope is to provide them with a safe and nourishing place to land.

For more information about "Milkweeds for Monarchs: The St. Louis Butterfly Project," contact St. Louis Sustainability Director Catherine Werner at WernerC@stlouis-mo.gov.

Mayors are invited to submit the "Best Practices" of their cities to U.S. MAYOR. Contact Public Affairs at 202-293-7330 or send e-mail to

usmayor@usmayors.org

