Butterfly Update

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If you have zinnias, porter weed, mistflower, milkweed, mint marigold, passion vine, Katy Road rose, duranta, and coral vine or a similar mix of flowers blooming in your landscape, it is probably loaded with butterflies. The inventory may include Monarchs, Queens, Gulf Fritillaries, Pipevine Swallowtails, Black Swallowtails, Giant Swallowtails, Bordered Patch, Painted Ladies, Snouts, Sulfurs, Whites, Hairstreaks, and Skippers. This has been a great year for butterflies.

All of the butterfly species are attractive and welcome but Monarchs are the most popular.

The Monarchs have been in San Antonio in limited numbers for about 4 weeks but they showed up en masse about October 20. The Monarchs migrate from north to south each year. Here in San Antonio and across the South they are taking a nectar break before the final leg of their migration to their wintering ground in forested mountains west of Mexico City where they roost on the fir trees until next March. At that point this same generation will head back north again stopping in San Antonio and other areas in the South to lay their eggs on milkweeds before they die. The next generation only lives long enough (about 3 weeks) to fly further north to lay their eggs on other milkweed. This next generation is also short-lived. It moves further north and spreads over a wide range including most of the upper tier of states in the US and southern Canada where more egg-laying occurs before they die. The new generation which they produce is the one that will pass through the South including San Antonio next October and November on the way south to the wintering grounds. This wintering generation survives for approximately 8 months from September through April.

As the brief account relates, Monarch Butterflies are not only beautiful but they have an interesting natural history. The complexity, and dependence on the availability of milkweed and a diverse set of habitats makes them vulnerable to population fluctuations. Removal of roosting trees, ecotourism in Mexico, cold weather, droughts, destruction of milkweed, and insecticide use have all been cited as contributing to a severe population drop in 2012-13. The numbers have been increasing since then but are still lower than pre-2012 numbers.

Texas gardeners, government entities, and non-profits have all been responding to the challenge of Monarch population stability. Texas universities are conducting research with donated and tax supported funding and thousands of milkweeds have been planted. For information on the research and initiatives being conducted on behalf of Monarch ecology, search for “Monarch Butterflies” on the internet. San Antonio was one of the first cities to join the Monarch initiative for communities and landholders down the I35 corridor.

Antelope horn and green milkweed are the most common milkweed species in Texas. They are very desirable for Monarch reproduction but not favorite landscape plants. If you planted milkweed you obtained from a retail nursery or other source in San Antonio, it is probably either tropical milkweed (Asclepias currassvica) or butterfly weed (Asclepias tuberosa). Both have attractive orange flowers and are excellent nectar sources. In my landscape tropical milkweed has been used readily by Monarchs (and related Queens) for egg-laying sites. The A.tuberosa is a smaller plant that is identified by some sources as a favored egg-laying site but it has not happened in my landscape yet.

Even if the milkweeds growing in your landscape this year were used as egg-laying and caterpillar feeding sites, and defoliated by the Queen butterfly this fall, expect them to re-leaf in time to be used as egg-laying sites by Monarchs next spring. In addition, flowers such as coreopsis, calendula, verbena, zinnias, phlox, larkspur, lantana, phacelia, and penta that you can have blooming next spring will provide nectar for the new generation produced in San Antonio for their migration north.