

Feature Story



Saving the Monarch Butterfly: One milkweed at a time

One milkweed at a time

RESEARCH TRIANGLE PARK, NC, October 12, 2017 — Over the last two decades, the monarch butterfly population has decreased by 90 percent. Through the Living Acres initiative, BASF started the #MonarchChallenge to reverse this trend. The challenge helps growers create new milkweed habitats, which is where adult monarchs lay their eggs and is the only food source available for monarch caterpillars. More than 1,500 applicants signed up this year, and BASF distributed 500 milkweed kits to growers across the country, making this challenge a great success.

To keep the momentum going, the Living Acres team is spreading awareness about the importance of milkweed through a series of outreach events, including the Farm Progress Show in Illinois and Bugfest in North Carolina. Their tour will continue at the Durham, N.C. Monarch Festival, which celebrates the monarch's impressive 2,500-mile journey across Canada, the U.S. and Mexico.

Living Acres is also partnering with golf courses, teachers and schools to rally more support for the cause.

"We want as many partners as possible for the #MonarchChallenge," said Laura Vance, Biology Project Leader for Soil Management at BASF. "Growers are the foundation of this program. They are our customers, our stewards of the land and have acreage in critical areas. Making grower partnerships is our primary focus, but we do want to expand to other groups. The more people involved, the better."

Vance encourages anyone interested in helping the monarch butterfly population to create a milkweed habitat of their own. She shares the following helpful tips to get started.

Planting milkweed

"The easiest way to start a habitat is by planting milkweed seedlings in the spring," said Vance. "If you're going to start from seed, make sure there's not a lot of competition from other plants, particularly grasses."

Milkweed seeds need to go through a period of cold stratification, which is important for their germination. This helps break the seed's natural dormancy cycle by exposing it to winter-like temperatures, which soften or crack the seed's hard outer casing. Without the prolonged exposure to cold, the milkweed seed is not likely to sprout. And even with proper stratification, germination and survival rates are often low.

"This is why we send out milkweed seedlings rather than seeds with the #MonarchChallenge," said Vance. "It's an easier process."

Where to purchase milkweed

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Next year, growers and members of farm families can get seedlings from BASF by signing up for the #MonarchChallenge. However, this Facebook page is not the only option available to find milkweed seedlings.

There are over 80 species of milkweed native to North America. Depending on the specific region and growing conditions, different species will perform better. More information can be found on the USDA Plant Database.

“We encourage you to ask your local nurseries to stock milkweed seedlings for spring planting,” said Vance. “Additionally, some types of milkweed seedlings are available through online nurseries.”

Further milkweed care

“You want to baby the milkweed plant a little bit the first year,” said Vance. “In particular, controlling grasses surrounding the seedling is important. Make sure to water it if you go for prolonged periods without rain.”

Once milkweed makes it past the first year of growth, there’s not much needed to keep the plant going. It’s a perennial, so it will continue to come back year after year.

With the interest Living Acres garnered this last year, the Living Acres team is hopeful this initiative will grow and expand well into the future.

“We’ve found that monarch migration captures the interest of all ages,” said Vance. “Older generations have vivid memories of large groups of monarchs flying overhead or roosting in trees, and they want their grandkids to be able to have the same experience. Many people aren’t aware of the importance of milkweed in the monarch’s life cycle and they are excited to learn how to help.”

To learn more about the Living Acres #MonarchChallenge and to sign up for the monarch newsletter, visit www.monarchchallenge.com.

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