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Planting the Seeds of Hope

By Chris Lavin



Burton Valley Elementary School fifth-graders are intent on helping to bring back declining numbers of monarch butterflies by planting milkweed seedlings and distributing them throughout Lamorinda. From left: Joel Clarke, Rhett Skvarna, Tommy Hillman, Mason Archer, Logan Ketcham, Jonathan Clarke, Chloe Burrows and Jenna Barton. Kim Curiel is the garden coordinator and Laura Lowell teaches science. Photo Chris Lavin

sanctuaries in the East Bay this year. Why milkweed?

"We wanted to start making a place where butterflies could land and eat," said Mason Archer. And what else? urged Curiel. "And a place to lay their eggs," he replied. She smiled and nodded her approval.

Science teacher Lowell says the project would never have gotten off the ground without Curiel. "Kim has a passion, and I have the passion for teaching these kids," Lowell said. Indeed, Curiel sports an enamel monarch pin that she simply doesn't take off. "It was my mother's, and it means a lot to me."

A visit to the school shows that the garden means a lot to the students as well. Enthusiasms abound. "Monarchs are pollinators for plants like this!" said Tommy Hillman, holding up a bright orange marigold. And the color attracts them, he said.

The classes started with 6,000 seeds and students worked to get them planted into plastic containers, watered regularly, and when the time was right, transplanted some into their own garden. Others they gave to groups wanting to create their own "Way Stations" for monarchs on their migration. The kids are now anxiously awaiting the plants to grow before monarchs begin to flutter their ways down from Canada to their roosts in Central and Southern California and Mexico. They stop to feed along the way - and to lay their eggs, which they do only on select varieties of milkweed plants because that is the only thing their children will eat. Sort of like a toddler holding out for macaroni and cheese, but a lot worse. A hungry child will eventually eat a piece of broccoli. A monarch larva will die.

It's more like a memory of past springs and summers, rather than a ubiquitous current image: Children running through fields or playgrounds, a butterfly net aloft, in pursuit of their objects of fascination. Captured, examined, gently released. The trouble is, it's not happening much now. Because there just aren't that many butterflies.

Monarch butterfly populations here are in especially serious trouble. The insect-devoted Xerces Society has them down by 50 percent, which is better than on the other side of the Rocky Mountains, where populations are down 90 percent. Yet there is hope, and it starts with every last fifth grader in the garden of Burton Valley Elementary School in Lafayette holding a milkweed seed in one hand and poking a hole in the dirt with the other.

"We're focusing almost everything on milkweed," said master gardener Kim Curiel. They're growing flowering nectar plants, too, but those aren't quite as important because monarchs feed many flowers. "The monarchs are going to die out altogether unless they have milkweed."

Led by Curiel and science teacher Laura Lowell, the students are raising three varieties of milkweed to establish a Monarch Butterfly Way Station at the school and in public places like Roger's Ranch. So far, Curiel says, the students have provided milkweed transplants for 11

"Milkweed is poison to people," said Logan Ketcham. Curiel is an intense, driven gardener who sees the relationships between people and plants and animals and soil and insects and nature all around her. Her passion comes through. When asked what is causing the precipitous demise of the monarch butterfly, her eyes narrow.

She has one word for it: "Roundup," she said. The drought isn't helping, either.

In short, amid the ongoing debate about genetically modified foods (GMOs), Monsanto has developed seeds now used in the vast majority of the country's fields. Corn, soybeans, the list goes on. But the seeds are developed to withstand the application of Roundup. The company claims - and many don't dispute it - that the crops themselves are not harmful to people. But, Curiel poses, what about the insects? Where did a tremendous number of milkweed plants grow in the past? Milkweed used to grow in the furrows of those fields, along their edges.

No more. So conservationists like the Burton Valley 10- and 11-year-old students are trying to make up a little bit of the difference. Because the butterflies need milkweed all along their migratory route to lay eggs, activists are calling for utility companies to spare the plants near their power lines, along the roadways connecting the country. Plants can be mowed. Just not during the migration.

Now the students have done their part. They have planted a Way Station, they are carefully watering it, watching the plants grow, and keeping their eyes on the sky.

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