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EDITOR'S PICK

FEATURED

## Embattled Monarch butterflies find a friend in Mount Olive

Jul 31, 2018

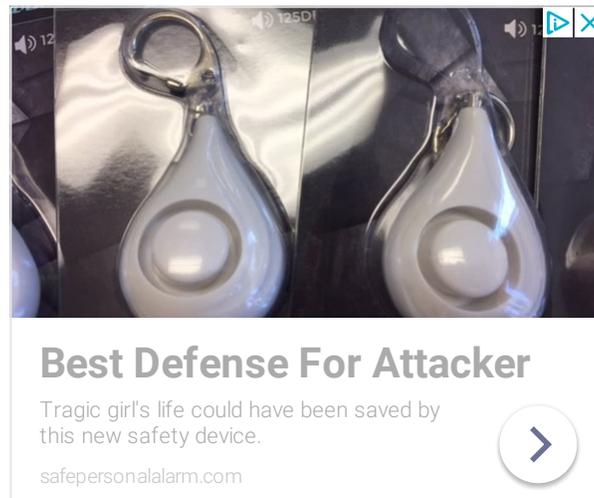


The Land Conservancy of N.J. has created a safe space for the imperiled, monarch butterfly.

**MOUNT OLIVE TWP.** – The monarch butterfly, one of nature’s most spectacular creatures, but also one of its most fragile, and one that is threatened with continual decline, is getting a boost in Budd Lake.

The Land Conservancy of N.J. is partnering with ArcheWild of Quakertown, Pa., to harvest native wildflower seeds, including milkweed specific to the bioregion. The seeds have been planted on four former corn fields totaling 28 acres along Smithtown Road.

The conservancy owns and protects a total of 209 acres in the preserve. The preserve also includes a community garden located at the intersection of Wolfe Road and Route 46. Preserved by The Land Conservancy and its partners including Mount Olive Township, the land was purchased to protect the headwaters of the South Branch of the Raritan River, a drinking water supply source for more than 1.5 million New Jersey residents.



Monarch butterflies have been dramatically impacted by the decline of native habitat, including milkweed that is necessary to help them lay their eggs and complete their four-generation migration across the continent. Over the past several decades, the number of monarch butterflies in North America has steeply declined. The International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources estimated that as of 2014, the monarch population has declined 90 percent since 1990.

"Together, we will plant these seeds and restore former corn fields into visually stunning meadows that will create essential habitat for all of the pollinators, including the monarchs," said a report from the Land Conservancy of N.J.

Trails also have been created throughout the meadows for public access as well as a butterfly camera that allows people to tune in from anywhere in the world and monitor the butterflies.

### *Land Specialist*

ArcheWild is a native landscape design and restoration firm specializing in leading programs for large land owners, government agencies and corporate customers.

The meadow is being developed over a seven-year period, using seeds collected from throughout the region. The first major task was to clear the site of invasive plant species and to prepare a seed bed. The meadows had been low-grade farming fields before being abandoned in the 1990s.



The conservancy saved the fields from development but the edges became choked with plants that inhibit or stop the growth of the all-important milkweed. Plants included honeysuckle, oriental bittersweet, privet, and multi-flora rose while the field interiors had become overgrown with mugwort.

The fields were mowed, the edges cut back to the original tree lines and stone walls, and the interiors sprayed with a light herbicide to put pressure on the mugwort.

The adult monarch butterfly is brightly colored, with orange upperwings, interlaced with black veins and surrounded by a wide, black border marked with numerous white spots. The color of the upper wings is a visual warning to predators that the monarch is poisonous, according to Worldwildlife.org.

Mark Garland is director of the Monarch Monitoring Project based in Cape May. He said that long-term trends show a “precipitous decline based mostly on the (loss) of wintering grounds in Mexico.”

Adding to the decline is the changes in the mid-west American farm belt including genetically modified crops which spawn fewer pests and much less milkweed for the monarchs. Garland said the monarch decline has been less dramatic in the northeast.

Climate change is another significant issue as large tropical storms can have devastating effects on monarchs.



“We definitely see a correlation between severe drought in Texas and loss of monarchs,” Garland said.

In August of 2014, a petition was filed with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to have the monarch butterfly listed as an endangered species. The USFWS recognized the validity of the petition and has started to review the species, though no concrete protections have been put in place yet.

If the monarch is classified as endangered, it would require the federal government to develop a species development plan, Garland said.

There were also tri-national agreements started under the Obama administration to plant milkweeds and restore federal lands in the U.S., Mexico and Canada. Garland said the efforts have slowed under the Trump administration.

Garland said it is difficult to gauge the monarch population from year to year because of climate changes and because females can lay more than 200 eggs a year, causing the population to rise or fall.

The monarchs leave overwintering grounds in Mexico in early spring. Along their route they mate and reproduce. They died within a few weeks and offspring continue the migration northwards in search of food and milkweed, according to [conservewildlifenj.org](http://conservewildlifenj.org).

Southern New Jersey and Cape May in particular show heavy concentrations of migrating monarchs.

A report from the N.J. Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) notes that female monarch ready to lay eggs must seek out milkweed, as it is the only host plant that can support monarch caterpillars.

The monarch's epic migration have long fascinated people in North American In Mexico, the arrival of migrating monarchs coincides with the fall celebration of "Día de los Muertos," or Day of the Dead, a holiday intended to honor deceased ancestors. Local legend views the monarch arrival as the return of souls of the dead in time to be honored by this holiday.

Pollination is critical to the human food supply. Every third bite of food an average person eats is the product of pollination from monarchs and many other pollinator species, the DEP report said.

"It is imperative to preserve pollinators for the sake of food security, and the security of the environment as a whole. Monarchs and other butterflies are sensitive to environmental changes, and their decline serves as a readily visible sign of the condition of the environment for other living things as well," the DEP report said.

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By Phil Garber