



Wild Ones

NATIVE PLANTS, NATURAL LANDSCAPES

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A voice for the natural landscaping movement.

School may be out, but it's still time to learn

Summer didn't want to arrive in Wisconsin this year. I spent a cold, windy morning on Earth Day clearing trash along the shore of Lake Winnebago. My husband and I picked up a lot of beer cans, fishing lures and bait containers, and homework that never got turned in from the nearby elementary and middle school.

It's all about making a difference, and that is where Wild Ones and its myriad of chapters and members stand out. They help their communities, educating neighbors, friends, family and others about the benefits of natural landscaping, and how they can make a difference even with topics as serious as climate change.

In fact, one of the best things about being editor of the *Wild Ones Journal* is that I always keep learning more about native landscaping. And in this issue, I learned a lot.

For instance, I've learned jumping worms scare me, and I don't want them on my property. (OK, I knew that before.) But as people become more knowledgeable about this invasive worm, the better off our gardens will be. If you don't live in the 34 states that are currently home to this worm that likes to thrash and turn soil into something that resembles coffee grounds, be sure to read the story on [Page 34](#), especially if your chapter is considering hosting a plant swap or sale.

A similar lesson could be learned from Wild Ones member Andrea Matthies's battle with stiltgrass. In her email to me, Andrea wrote: "The local land stewards keep saying that it is so fortunate that it happened on our land instead of someone less tuned into land stewardship and that community. I get that. But Jim and I could really have done without this. Garlic mustard seems like child's play." Again, educating others about that nasty grass and how to identify it is one of the key ways to stop its spread. Read more on [Page 44](#).

This issue also features monarch news as we continue our 2023 series. Beca Schweitzer writes about some of the insects that can be found on milkweed ([Page 16](#)), while Mackenzie Seymour warns that monarch populations will continue to decline if humans don't do anything to stop it. ([Page 37](#)).

The need to get children involved in nature and native landscaping is evident. Krystal Coxon describes how she's made her children "investigators" as she helps them see the wonders in their yard. Learn how you can do the same on [Page 28](#).

So, when rain is forcing you to stay inside, get comfy on your couch or sit down with a beverage and enjoy this issue. And better yet, if you have story ideas you'd like to share, email journal@wildones.org. Our members and chapters are doing so much good; help us spread the word!

— Barbara A. Schmitz



Barbara A. Schmitz

Promoting environmentally sound landscaping practices to preserve biodiversity through the preservation, restoration and establishment of native plant communities

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Established in 1977, Wild Ones is a national not-for-profit organization of members who teach the benefits of growing native plants and work together to grow and restore natural landscapes.

Wild Ones' definition of a native plant:
A native plant is a species that occurs naturally in a particular region, ecosystem and/or habitat and was present prior to European settlement.

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Part 2 of a 4-part series

This milkweed was planted for monarchs

But so many others visit in this circle-of-life saga

All photos by Besa Schweitzer



Milkweed aphids on milkweed

By Besa Schweitzer

My neighbor planted a swamp milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*) on the edge of her patio to attract monarchs (*Danaus plexippus*) to her yard. Swamp milkweed may be their most preferred food source of the milkweed genus, which the monarchs depend on during their caterpillar stage. This specimen grew to be about 4 feet tall and about as big around. The flowers bloomed, but the monarchs didn't come.

As I told my neighbor, it often can take time for an adult monarch to find a new source of host plants. Allowing the plant to become well established before the caterpillars begin feeding is better than freshly emerged seedlings being eaten to the ground by a very hungry caterpillar that showed up early. But eventually, the monarchs will arrive, seeking out each milkweed to serve as the host plant for a new generation.

Instead of attracting monarchs, however, the milkweeds' leaves first began to be colonized by aphids. The orange aphids are milkweed aphids (*Aphis nerii*), an introduced species from the Mediterranean that clones itself instead of reproducing sexually. Milkweed aphids store the cardiac glycosides produced by the milkweed plant. Their bright orange/yellow warning coloration serves to warn predators that they are poisonous.

When aphids colonize a plant, many gardeners first — and mistakenly wrongly — reach for insecticides. But when you are gardening for monarchs, insecticides, even organic insecticidal soap, would kill the very species you are trying to attract. Other common solutions to aphids are to spray them off with water or manually squish them. But my advice to my neighbor was to just leave them alone, let the food web naturally form, and the predators will come. Of course, it is very



A bee visits a milkweed flower

hard to watch a plant you have nurtured from a seed be damaged by an invasive aphid, sucking all of its life fluids. But patience can bring exciting results.

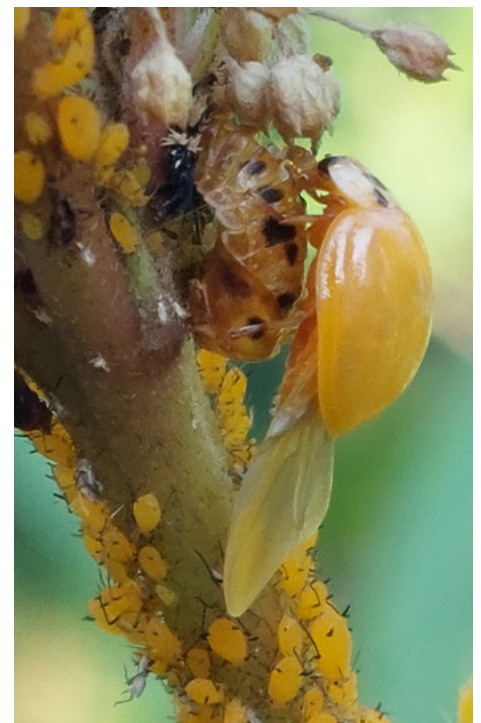
A few days later we were having coffee on her patio with the attacked/suffering milkweed standing nearby. The aphids were still present in force, but now there were also a few black and orange striped lady beetle nymphs (*Coccinellidae*) systematically piercing aphids to suck them dry and leaving a path of dead aphids behind. On closer inspection we found golden eggs clustered under the leaves in tight formation where the lady beetles had emerged.

More pale eggs nearby were suspended on threads; these are the eggs of the aphid lions (*Chrysoperla* sp.) They are born so ferocious that their parents must separate them at

birth on their own threads to make sure that they don't eat their siblings. Aphid lions look like little alligators snapping up aphids in their tiny, but strong jaws and mature into delicate green lacewings.

We also found flower or syrphid fly's youngsters (*Syrphidae* spp.), which are white, pointy-ended maggots that parasitize aphids causing them to turn brown. When the maggots become adults, they are important pollinators of the plant they just protected from aphids. And, jackpot, under a leaf was the tiny crystal meringue of a monarch egg.

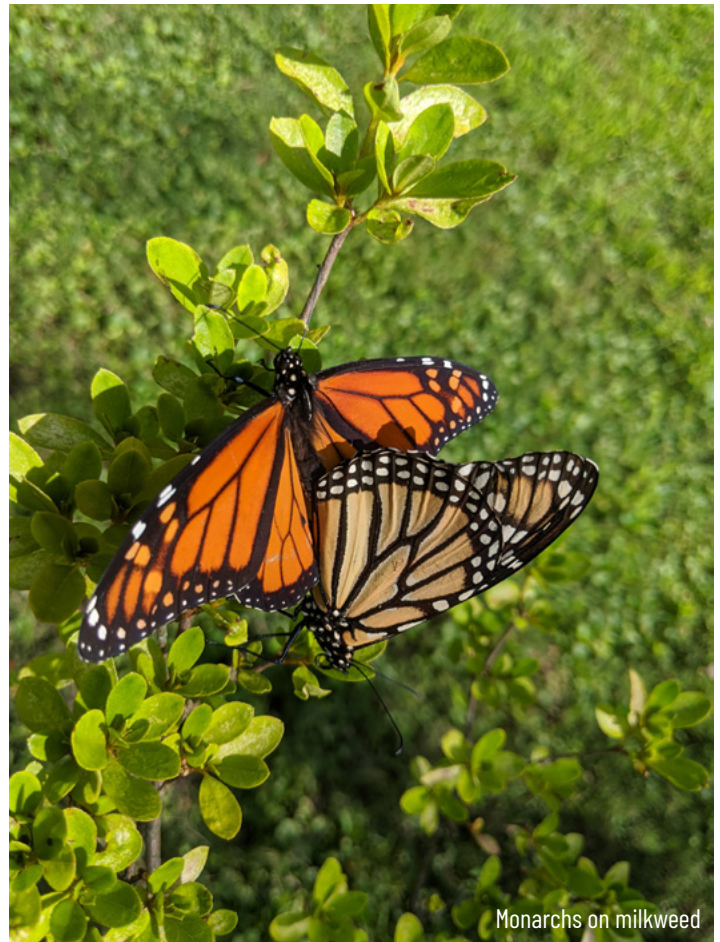
Now that the predators have arrived on site the milkweed plant is feeling some relief from the aphids. But now our monarch babies may also be in danger as predators do not know to avoid the endangered species when they are feeding. Monarch



A freshly emerged lady beetle sits on its larval exoskeleton as juicy aphids surround it.



A juvenile lady beetle



Monarchs on milkweed

caterpillars concentrate the cardiac glycosides from the milkweed plant in their bodies and even retain this deadly chemical in their adult butterfly form, making them distasteful to predators. Many of the species dependent on milkweed as their host plant have learned to work around or even co-opt the chemicals the milkweed plants have developed to protect themselves from predators.

Soon the monarch caterpillars hatch. They are easy to spot by the damaged leaves. Flip one over and a tiny striped monarch baby will be busily munching underneath. The caterpillars seem to double in size overnight; we checked on them daily and marveled at their growth. The adult butterflies were also seen visiting the garden more often, laying even more eggs. My neighbor was relieved that the butterflies found her garden a suitable place to start a family. The life of a butterfly is not easy, and mortality is high out in the wild, even when you are a monarch.

As the food web develops around

the milkweed plant, larger predators arrive. Flower crab spiders, (*Misumenina* sp.), stand guard on the flower head to nab unwary visitors, changing their color to match the flower for camouflage and ambush their prey. Praying mantises (*Stagmomantis carolina*), dangle from the stem, grabbing bugs and beetles as they are distracted by the aphid harvest.

Visiting pollinators may also be captured. Although it is all part of the food web, it can be hard to watch a butterfly being eaten as its torn wings drift slowly to the ground. I find it amusing, in a morbidly necessary way, that the aphids pierce the plant to suck out the sap, and in turn the aphids are pierced by their predators, which suck out the aphids' body fluids. The whole system is like one complicated straw, sucking nutrients upward out of the air and soil from plant to insect, until a bird comes along and plucks an unwary predator and stuffs it into a chick's mouth.

Who needs TV when you can sit near a swamp milkweed and watch

battles rage from stem to stem, birth and death, eggs becoming nymphs becoming adults, so many different species doing what they do best. Plants are eaten by aphids, then eaten by beetles, who are eaten by mantises, in turn then eaten by birds, who then disperse to far corners and eventually be eaten themselves. Eggs are carefully laid on a selected host and hatch, eat and grow. The lucky few that avoid predation become adults to start the cycle over again. We could (and do) sit here for hours, fascinated by the drama in front of our eyes. This milkweed was planted to attract monarchs, but it has summoned an entire ecosystem.

Besa Schweitzer is a native garden specialist with over 20 years' experience gardening with native plants. She is also the author of "The Wildflower Garden Planner," an interactive guidebook to native landscaping in Missouri. Besa is a member of the Wild Ones St. Louis (Missouri) Chapter. Read her blog at <https://besaschweitzer.wixsite.com/growswild/blog>.