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As monarchs migrate, Denville works to protect their habitat

By HANNAH PETERS
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DENVILLE – As monarch butterflies make their annual journey south to Mexico, Denville is working to give the species a better chance of surviving the trip and future migrations.

This past Saturday, the Denville Environmental Commission held a Monarch Month celebration with the unveiling of two educational signs about monarch butterflies and pollinators, along with a free milkweed giveaway for residents.



Mayor Thomas Andes and Denville Beautification Committee Chairman Dave Sipple unveiled the educational sign installed at Denville Park Meadow.

Photo courtesy of Maja Britton

This event, along with several other conservation efforts, are part of a commitment Denville made earlier this year.

In February, Mayor Thomas Andes signed the Mayor's Monarch Pledge, a program through the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) that asks communities to support creating "habitat for the monarch butterfly and pollinators, and to educate residents about how they can make a difference at home and in their community," according to its website.

The pledge commits the township to completing at least three action items during the year.

Denville completed four actions, including an April native tree seedling giveaway, an expansion of the pollinator gardens at Denville Park Meadow, adopting an ordinance protecting native plant species and issuing a mayoral proclamation declaring October Monarch Month in Denville.

Andes read the proclamation again at the Saturday event.

The commission must also submit a final report to the National Wildlife Federation by the end of the year.

Co-chair of Denville's Environmental Commission Julie Stroffolino discussed the pledge and the importance of supporting pollinators in Denville and beyond.

"By signing the pledge, the town acknowledges that municipalities have an important role to play in helping to conserve the monarch butterfly population, which has declined by 80 to 90% over the past couple decades," she said.



Julie Stroffolino talks with residents during the event's milkweed giveaway.

Photo courtesy of Maja Britton

Local Efforts To Support Pollinators

On Saturday, the commission distributed about 70% of the more than 100 potted plants it received through a grant. The remaining milkweed will be planted at the middle school, Stroffolino said.

"We were happy with the turnout," she said.

The pollinator gardens at Denville Park Meadow, which feature a variety of native perennials with varying bloom times, were first installed around four years ago and have undergone several developments over the years.

In addition to the pollinator garden near the park's parking lot, another garden is located across Riverside Drive.

In late September, volunteers from the Morris Knolls Interact Club worked at the Park Meadow site, preparing the pollinator gardens under the direction of Dave Sipple, chairman of the Denville Beautification Committee.

Students from Celebrate the Children School also volunteered their time to help arrange the stones around the garden and assist with planting.



The pollinator garden efforts have been led by Chairman of Denville's Beautification Committee Dave Sipple, who led volunteer work at the garden in September.

Photo courtesy of the Denville Green Sustainability Committee

With grant support, the commission has installed four educational signs about monarch butterflies and pollinators this year. In addition to the two unveiled Saturday, two signs were unveiled at Muriel Hepner Park during the April tree seedling giveaway.

“We came up with the idea because we are focusing on monarchs a lot this year. Why not put some interpretive signs over by our pollinator gardens?” Stroffolino said.

Sustainable Jersey and PSE&G helped fund signs at Denville Park Meadow, while the Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions supported the signs at Muriel Hepner Park.

With the proximity of Muriel Hepner Park to the middle school, the commission hoped to create an educational trail around the pond with the signs installed around the pathway.



Park goers now have the chance to learn more about monarch butterflies through the educational sign at Riverside Drive's pollinator garden.

Photo courtesy of Julie Stroffolino

The Monarch Migration

October marks the tail end of the monarchs' fall migration to Mexico, and residents may still have opportunities to spot the butterflies passing through the area.

"You can certainly see the butterflies flying around," Stroffolino said.

She said areas with milkweed and other native or nectar-bearing plants as the most likely places to spot the iconic orange butterflies.

Monarchs can travel thousands of miles during migration. The generation that makes the fall journey south is several generations removed from the butterflies that began the northward migration in the spring, Stroffolino explained.

Despite never having made the journey before, the migrating butterflies travel to specific areas in Mexico, where they gather in oyamel fir trees to spend the winter before beginning the northward journey again in the spring.

Cape May is another popular place to observe the migration, Stroffolino said, as monarchs traveling along the Atlantic coast gather near the tip of the peninsula before crossing Delaware Bay.

How Residents Can Help

Milkweed is particularly important to monarch survival because it is the only plant on which monarchs lay their eggs and the only food source for monarch caterpillars. Without it, caterpillars cannot survive, Stroffolino said.

Residents can help by planting milkweed and other native plants, particularly late-blooming flowers that provide nectar for pollinators during the fall.

Asters and goldenrods are two native plants that can help provide that food source. Stroffolino recommended asters as an alternative to chrysanthemums, commonly known as mums, which are not native to the area and generally provide less support for pollinators.

Stroffolino has planted milkweed in her own front yard and has raised several monarch caterpillars this year with her third-grade son, giving him the opportunity to watch them transform into butterflies.



The Denville Environmental Commission gave away two native varieties of milkweed to residents as part of its Monarch Month Celebration: butterfly milkweed, which prefers drier conditions and rose/swamp milkweed, which favors wet soil.

Photo courtesy of Stephanie Turkot

Avoiding pesticides and herbicides is another important step, Stroffolino said, because those products can harm beneficial insects and other wildlife along with the pests they are intended to target.

“If you’re spraying, it’s going to affect the creatures that we don’t necessarily want to get rid of as well,” she said.

Stroffolino explained that avoiding pesticides and adding native plants to one’s garden is the best way to support monarchs and pollinators overall.

“Generally, anything that helps pollinators is also going to help monarchs,” she said. “The monarch just happens to be very iconic and recognizable. People love them, so it gets people interested in other pollinators. By helping monarchs, you’re also helping all those other creatures that maybe aren’t as pretty.”

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