



Chat Questions/answers from our May 2023 Chapter Meeting

We ran out of time during the questions period after Rita Venable's talk on **A Home for Butterflies** at our May 2023 chapter meeting. Rita has graciously provided answers and comments to the chat messages from that meeting.

- Rita, do you agree to saving monarch caterpillars by taking them in and releasing once they've eclosed, stretched their wings and had their first meal? Always heard we are increasing their livelihood by about 75-80%.

ANSWER:

There's a great explanation by the Xerces Society here that explains why the practice of raising Monarchs for release to increase their numbers isn't really the best answer to dwindling Monarch population numbers. Check it out: <https://xerces.org/blog/keep-monarchs-wild>

- Mountain mint is controllable. Right?

ANSWER:

Yes, it is if you watch the edges around it. It is an aggressive native and can be very useful in certain situations.

In the Giving Garden, however, there is a pollinator strip about 4-5' wide and 20' long or so. It is planted with mostly native perennials to attract wild pollinators for the crops grown in the garden (the food is all given away in the community). Planting the mountain mint there was not one of my better ideas. The mm spread and is crowding out some of the lesser aggressive plants and is decreasing diversity. You might say, why not just pull it out occasionally? The answer to that is because labor on the farm/garden is limited - there just isn't time or people to keep the mint in check each season. The idea of a pollinator strip is to have diverse floral resources (for different bee preferences and tongue lengths) all 3 seasons.

- I understood from Red Cross First Aid training that a toxic substance does not kill whereas a poison substance kills? Is Milkweed toxic or poisonous?

ANSWER:

Toxins are biological in origin and occur naturally, poisons are either biological or chemical substances (mercury, arsenic, etc.). So, all toxins are poisons but all poisons are not toxins. See here: <https://pharmaeducation.net/difference-between-poison-and-toxin/>

So according to this website, the chemicals in milkweeds are toxins because they are biological in origin.

- What's the best way to order your book, Rita?

ANSWER:

Parnassus in Green Hills (Nashville), Wood Thrush Shop (Nashville), Wild Birds in some cities. Also, online at https://ritavenable.com/?page_id=22
It isn't on Amazon. We ship anywhere in the U.S.

- I have a question about the mulch for a butterfly garden? I would like our church's pollinator garden to be friendly for not only butterflies but also bumblebees so children can observe these creatures from a distance safely and learn. We have a large preschool of 150 children and they raise Painted Ladies each spring in the 4 yr old classes. Do you recommend mulching or leaving bare ground for bumble bee nests?

ANSWER:

If the garden isn't on a slope, bare soil is okay, if you don't mind weeding a bit more. It isn't necessary to have bare ground right in the floral area, however, and may even be preferable to not have it there if children are involved. Bees will usually ignore people when they are feeding, but if you approach their nest, they can become defensive.

I would not use wood chips as they take nitrogen from the soil. I would not use mulch from municipal sources because you don't know where it came from and what might be in it that you don't want. Leaf litter is good unless you have Asian jumping worms in your soil. If possible, I use pine straw and try to plant the plants close together so there's not as much weeding to do.

- What are the native species of lantana?

ANSWER:

Lantana involucrata and L. depressa are both native to Florida. I haven't tried either one in TN, but might if I find it available somewhere.

- Good point about cleaning cages, etc. and that it's better to increase habitat than raising captive monarchs. One of the recent Monarch Joint Venture webinars had a graph correlating increase pressure from parasites with the increased popularity of raising monarchs by hobbyists.

ANSWER:

Thanks.

- Have the overwintering numbers from Mexico been released yet? They were up over 30% last year (2021-2022 season).

ANSWER:

Yes. Here: <https://journeynorth.org/monarchs/resources/article/03212023-monarch-winter-2022-2023-population-numbers-released>

- tags for monarchs are on a sheet, individually affixed in rows and columns. There is no transfer of disease between Monarchs that are tagged. We do it every year at the nature centers in Montgomery County.

ANSWER:

Tagging has no doubt provided some invaluable data for scientists about the movements of Monarchs.

However, there are other points of contact with the butterfly besides the tags — the people's hands who handle the Monarchs by removing them from the nets and placing the tag on the wing, the nets that capture the Monarchs, etc. I just wonder if parasites, viruses and bacteria could be spread in this way.

I just prefer to monitor Monarchs without disturbing them - by observation, photography and habitat improvement. Providing better habitat with native plants is my most recommended way for the public to help the Monarchs.

- Is the reason most butterflies live only a week due to being eaten?

ANSWER:

Partly, but mostly the answer is that they have just completed their life cycle by reproducing.