



Fall reminder for Tropical milkweed care By Trecia Neal



Milkweed, in the plant genus *Asclepius*, is the only plant that the monarch butterfly can lay their eggs to reproduce. There are 23 native species of milkweed in the state of Georgia, and over a hundred species in North America. Due to native milkweed shortage at nurseries, Tropical Milkweed, *Asclepius curassavica* has for many years been the only milkweed choice available for sale to gardeners eager to help the monarch butterfly. This is slowly changing due to consumer demand. Please see Monarchs Across Georgia's webpage, [Native Milkweed Sources](#) for nurseries in the southeast that sell neonicotinoid free native milkweed species appropriate for areas in the southeast. MAG recommends phasing out Tropical Milkweed whenever possible by planting native milkweed species appropriate to your area. [Guide to Georgia Milkweeds](#).

Tropical milkweed causes three problems that are known at this time for monarchs. 1) **When Tropical Milkweed is planted in temperate areas, it usually does not die back in the winter.** When monarchs visit it, they deposit spores of *Ophryocystis elektroscirrha* or OE for short. (for more information on OE, visit www.monarchparasites.org) Because Tropical Milkweed doesn't usually die back in the fall, the spore load builds up to a high level over the winter as monarchs continue to visit. The concern is that monarchs on their return spring migration will become infected. Native milkweeds die back in the fall and winter and the spores die back along with them and there is no danger of reinfection. 2) **Research show that there is evidence that Tropical Milkweed is interfering with fall migration.** Because Tropical Milkweed is evergreen, monarchs are stopping and breeding when they should be continuing to Mexico. We now have a large permanent monarch colony in Florida due to the abundance of Tropical Milkweed, and there are several permanent colonies that have cropped up along the coast of Georgia and South Carolina recently. This is also happening along the coast of California where many homeowners have planted Tropical Milkweed. I observed monarchs breeding during Christmas while I was in California on vacation when monarchs should have been overwintering. 3) **Climate change may exacerbate the problem.** Recent research has shown that higher temperatures increases cardenolide levels in Tropical Milkweeds. Normally this is the compound in the genus *Asclepius* that they get from ingesting milkweed leaves that protects monarchs from predators. However, higher temperatures apparently cause Tropical Milkweed to increase the plants levels of cardenolides to a level that is so toxic, that monarch caterpillars cannot survive them. Climate change shows no sign of improving over the upcoming years, which means that Tropical Milkweed's range could easily spread and cause more damage to the survival of the monarch population.

Everyone can help to help to keep this from happening by following these recommendations: 1) if you currently have Tropical Milkweed in your gardens, try cut it down twice during the growing season. Also remove it, or cut it down to the ground before migration begins in your area. See this link for dates in your area. <https://www.monarchwatch.org/tagmig/peak.html> Cutting back Tropical milkweed will help prevent the spread of OE 2) plant additional native milkweed species in your garden, 3) share this fact sheet with friends and neighbors [Why Grow and Sell Native Milkweed?](#) 4) read the following resources, [Not All Milkweed Is Created Equal](#), about the potential risks of growing exotic (non-native) milkweeds for monarchs 5) Participate in research efforts. There are several citizen science programs dedicated to studying monarch ecology and conservation, including: Monarch Health, where participants test wild monarchs for the protozoan parasite OE (<http://monarchparasites.org/>); Monarch Larva Monitoring Project, where citizen scientists monitor a milkweed patch for eggs and larvae (<http://mlmp.org/>); Monarch Watch, where participants obtain tags and then tag monarchs (<http://monarchwatch.org/>); and Journey North, where you can report monarch and milkweed sightings (<http://www.learner.org/jnorth/monarch/>).

Sources:

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