

## Marsh Milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*)

By Kim Smith

Perhaps you may have noticed how few Monarchs, and butterflies in general (for our region), are on the wing this season. Presumably the cause is the unusual weather pattern beginning in June and lasting through mid-July; the days on end of rain and well below average cold temperatures. Butterflies need the heat of the sun for their wings to warm sufficiently, to then feed and breed. Butterfly populations are cyclical and weather-dependent. I hope the cool, rainy weather conditions of this past summer are not a long-term trend as a result of global climate change.

Fortunately, this summer I did manage to film a female ovipositing. She arrived in our garden in early August. At long last—a dreamy summer morning— sunny, sultry, and steamy. I followed her for over an hour as she made her way through the milkweed patch, alternating between stopping for a drink of nectar and depositing dozens of eggs. Round and round she went, not minding my presence unless I ventured a little to close. She let me know of her displeasure and would disappear over the garden fence for a few minutes, then instinctively return, drawn to our little oasis of nectar and caterpillar host plants. Thereafter, I kept myself at her comfort level-distance.

Deliberately she deposited her brood, one glistening gilded drop at a time, curling her abdomen tightly round to the underside of each leaf. From the marsh milkweed to the common milkweed and back to the marsh, it didn't seem to matter which, but always near the top of the plant on the choicest leaves. As milkweed plants cycle through the drier days of summer they begin to drop their lower leaves. If she had deposited the eggs on the lower leaves her growing larvae would surely have perished.

Marsh milkweed has several common names; rose milkweed is my favorite. I hate to tell you that it is also frequently referred to as swamp milkweed. The words swamp and weed combined in the same plant name could be a deterrent for those less knowledgeable about its great beauty and pollinator-attracting capabilities. *Asclepias incarnata* grows throughout the U.S. and Canada—from Maine to Florida and as far west as Nevada; from Manitoba to Quebec. Marsh milkweed is ideal for the back of the border as it typically grows to four feet in moist to average soil when planted in full sun to light shade. Planted in a protected corner in our garden, where sheltered from strong wind, it grows five to six feet. The flowers bloom in terminal clusters and are a clear brilliant rose, fading to Persian pink. *Asclepias incarnata* 'Ice Ballet' is a vigorous plant with ivory white inflorescence.

I find milkweed aphids in far greater amounts on the foliage of marsh milkweed as opposed to that of common. Milkweed aphids are soft-bodied, bright orange pinhead-sized insects typically clustering by the hundreds. The absolute easiest and most effective way to eradicate milkweed aphids is to blast vigorously with the hose nozzle set on jet stream. If you are concerned about damaging the flower heads, hold the flowers in your hand while zapping with water. This will help mitigate damage to the plant from the fierce pressure of the hose. The next day you may see a few have managed to survive. If so, blast again. You should not have to do this for more than three days. Monarch eggs are attached to the leaf with quick-drying sticky glue and are designed

to withstand torrential downpours and tropical rains. The last thing you want to do is spray with a pesticide, which is really not an option at all—all stages of the butterfly larvae will also be killed. Don't make the mistake of ignoring the milkweed aphids. They will quickly destroy the looks of the plants by creating a sticky, vile mess.

As the season unfolds, the milkweeds developing seedpods provide added interest. When the pod splits you may observe that the individual seeds are arranged around a central axis in spiral formation. Attached to silky hair-like fibers that aid dispersal, when borne on the wind the seeds resemble shooting stars with trailing streamers. My regular readers know that our garden is a postage stamp and my milkweed patch is just the right size for our lot. I remove all seed heads of all the different species of milkweeds before they ripen to the point of dispersing, as milkweeds would easily overwhelm us. But if I had a very large plot I would grow vast quantities, an entire field, of milkweeds, and plan to someday!

Common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*) is the milkweed found growing in great abundance along the shoreline of Cape Ann. For more information on common milkweed follow this link to past articles at <http://www.kimsmithdesigns.com/eColumn.php>

*Children's Program:* Please join me Saturday, September 26<sup>th</sup>, 2009 downstairs in the Friend Room at the Sawyer Free Library for *Beauty on the Wing ~ Life Story of the Monarch Butterfly* (young people's version). Free. *All ages are welcome!*

*Female Monarch Ovipositing on Marsh Milkweed*

