

An Unexpected Gift
By Karen MacAulay, Hillsborough Garden Club

The year 2020 will be a year to remember for many reasons. A good memory of this year happened unexpectedly.

My husband Mac and I have a small .4-acre lot in downtown Hillsborough. We moved to Hillsborough 15 years ago from Ohio where we had success in raising milkweed and the Monarchs who need them in our naturally-landscaped 1/2-acre lot. So, we were ready to try our luck here as well. We had begun raising Monarch butterflies in containers to help more of them survive because their numbers have greatly declined.

On that morning in February the container that I used for raising our Monarch caterpillars through their life cycle had broken, so we ordered a new one that we hoped would serve our purpose. That was in late winter and dreams of a yard filled with milkweed and Monarchs were months away.

Monarchs, as their name implies, rule a vast area, migrating from either Mexico or Southern Florida, following several routes north through the U.S. and, after several generations, reaching their destination in places as far away as Canada. They return south in the late summer and fall. Their distinctive orange and black markings make them easy to spot flitting through our gardens. Sadly, their numbers have declined dramatically over the years for many reasons, chief among them being habitat loss where milkweed used to grow. Monarchs can only lay their eggs on milkweed plants, so our first order of business when we moved to NC was putting in natural gardens with milkweed.

Why our fascination with Monarchs, you ask? They are jewels in the garden, for sure, but more than that, they play a role in providing

pollination services, much like our bees and other beneficial pollinators. In fact, of all the butterfly species, they are said to be the best at it.

The summer into fall of 2020 turned out to be a super year for our Monarchs. That is the unexpected gift of 2020. We raised over 30 individuals in our new enclosure and many more survived on their own and found our yard to sip nectar or to lay eggs on our Milkweed plants.

The reason that I bring the caterpillars into an enclosure to raise is twofold; it gives them a better chance of survival and it serves as a teaching tool about this beautiful native butterfly. I like to tell their story to all I know, especially to the children. They often take part in the butterfly releases. See photo of a neighbor's child releasing a Monarch butterfly we had raised from an egg.

Something all of us can do to help the Monarchs is to plant a few milkweed plants in our yard. Then you, too, can experience the "magic" and help a species that needs our help, while they help us with their pollination services.

Buzzin' Around is an occasional feature written by members of the Hillsborough Garden Club in support of Hillsborough as the 35th Bee City USA. Members of the Bee City Subcommittee are planning a community Pollinator Week Celebration for June 2021.