

## Features

6/29/2015

### Distinctive Gardens: Mind the Monarchs

*Jennifer Polanz*

Last month we highlighted the BEE-WISE campaign at Dayton Nurseries in Norton, Ohio. This month we check in with Lisa LeFevre of Distinctive Gardens in Dixon, Illinois, about their extensive Monarch campaign, which kicked off in May to coincide with the butterfly's northern migration. Here's what she had to say.

**Q: How did you come up with the sequence of the programming and what all will you be doing?**

LL: 1. Research. Before developing a program we homed in on general Monarch knowledge biology, habitat, migration, challenges, etc. and determined how best we can serve our customers seeking garden-related information on the topic. Target audience: women 35+ interested in gardening, beginning level Monarch knowledge and family oriented.

2. Educated staff on the program. Encouraged dialog and debate to best assess and develop our collective position on various points and congeal a cohesive message for the public.

3. Assessed our business property habitat and applied to be a Monarch Waystation through [MonarchWatch.org](http://MonarchWatch.org).

4. Identified what plants we currently offered that are either host or nectar plants and filled in gaps with extra orders where lacking.

5. Developed a four-part weekly blog series focusing on the Monarch that launched May 8. Topics included: migration, milkweed, population decline and helping Monarchs. We opted to tell the story in a lighthearted manner. For example, Week 2 was: "Milkweed: The hottest B&Bs along the Monarch Highway." Throughout the series we likened the Monarch story to that of a family vacation. There's a tremendous amount of technical information available through various organizations. We chose a complementary approach to create access for those interested without overwhelming them with either technical jargon or inherent topic controversy.

6. Lined up several talks, including a TV appearance, to begin the process of exposing the topic to the public. Talk audiences included garden, senior and civic groups, schools and a feature talk at our local farmer's market. We shared resources with area teachers to enable them to establish Monarch habitats on school grounds. As word got out about our topic, more requests came in to give talks indicating initial interest existed.

7. Developed a social media campaign to extend the blog series reach using Facebook, Pinterest, Twitter, Google+ and Instagram. Began teasing out the topic in mid/late April.
8. Designed signs for the “Monarch Department” within our perennial area and created specific tags identifying both host and nectar plants.
9. “Tagged” all Monarch-attracting plants with “Monarch habitat” on our website plant database to aid in searching.
10. Placed emphasis on Monarchs during our Springfest open house event, holding a QuickClass on Monarchs and running a special on milkweed for an hour.
11. Extended our “Combo of the Week” campaign to include perennials. In June, for National Pollinator Week, we are featuring asclepias varieties.

**Q: What kinds of questions/comments/concerns are you hearing from your customers about pollinators?**

LL: We are in the early stages of this Monarch program. Currently, Monarch-related questions and statements remain general, such as “Where did they go?” Or “I used to have Monarchs in my yard. Now I see none.” We’re also hearing questions on native plants. “What will they do in my home garden?” Or “How do they grow?” “Will they take over or spread?” As the program continues, we expect the range of questions to increase over time.

Over the years, general pollinator question/comments/concerns range from habitat loss to a flurry of debate and dialog on the use of chemicals. Much of that is coming in through our social media channels. Customer attention to topics—such as Roundup, GMO crops, environmental impact, bees, sustainability—ebb and flow.

Combining current public attention on pollinators with now actively promoting the topic, for us, I see renewed interest right around the corner. We expect two main types of questions forthcoming: those on chemicals and habitat. Pollinator questions on the use of neonics may present, now that larger corporations are co-opting the debate as a marketing platform. Questions on proper habitat, specifically native versus cultivars may rise as our customers gain interest and become more informed.

Despite challenging factors, I see opportunity to improve our business. However bumpy, raising awareness opens doors for dialog and potential growth.

**Q: What can you share with other retailers as to the key points to address with customers?**

LL: Without a balanced industry position, we are on our own to determine how best to serve customers. I can share what we do, but it may not be a good fit for all. For us, we focus on the following:

Keep it as simple as possible. Focus on plants and habitat. Leave the political and environmental debates at the door as much as possible. We are in the plant business, not a chemical business or political action firm.

Thus, our main focus is on plants and, when talking pollinators, habitat. Main messaging concentrates on those two topics.

Due diligence is in order for fielding specific questions, such as those on neonics or native versus non-natives. Stay abreast of information as it unfolds. No science yet exists that soundly makes any definitive claims on the neonic topic. And with both topics, there will be purists, and perhaps even fanatics, at every turn within this terrain. Avoid relying on information from sources, organizations or industry associations that are clearly dominated by a single view. Double check your facts and remain open to dialog. Be honest.

For natives and cultivars, we focus on first sharing the passion of gardening to all types of people from beginners to seasoned vets. Igniting interest is top priority. Once attracted, opportunity exists to move into more detailed aspects of gardening. Part of that means being willing to make a judgment call on how we conduct our business and what information we dispel. Arguments exist on both sides of the native versus non-native debate. Currently, we opt to promote both and partner with a local prairie plug grower to increase native options.

In a general sense, we keep on topic: plants. We address controversial questions and concerns on an individual basis. And we attempt to remain open, honest and informative if debate arises. **GP**