

Features

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Behind the Variety: From Accident to Promise

Katie Elzer-Peters

Charlotte Merritt discovered Monarch's Promise, a new cultivar of *Asclepias curassavica* completely by accident while clipping food for caterpillars at her family's butterfly farm in Northeast Florida.

"I was in the greenhouse and my daughter (Charlotte) ran in with the cutting. She'd never seen a variegated asclepias. None of us had. Charlotte just thought it was beautiful and unusual. She spared no thought to propagating that cutting. But I did," says Edith Smith, co-founder, with her husband Stephen, of Shady Oak Butterfly Farm.

At the time of discovery, Edith had her hands full raising 6,000 very hungry caterpillars and butterflies from 30 different species per week. Owning a patent for a plant was the furthest thing in her mind, but, having studied horticulture in college and with experience growing plants to feed her butterflies, she decided to grow the cuttings and see what happened. "As it became clear that the variegation was staying true all year long, we decided to look into the next steps," she says.

The Smiths live in a horticultural hotspot and are friends with a hibiscus breeder and developer, Curt Sinclair. "He has beautiful plants. They've been featured on Martha Stewart. We knew he knew what he was talking about when he pointed us toward working with Hort Couture," Edith says.

Hort Couture ran with the plant, which it promotes as an annual milkweed, since it's hardy to Zones 10 to 11. Jennifer Hatalski from Hort Couture adds: "We have been involved with and trialing this plant for about four years. It is Edith's first plant to market, so we worked with her closely on getting through the patenting process." Edith was grateful, because despite building a veritable online empire that ships thousands of butterflies to more than 30 exhibits in the United States, classrooms and individuals, they were not prepared for the legal and marketing aspects of a plant patent. The Smiths retain the rights to sell retail at their farm, but all wholesale growing and marketing is handled by Hort Couture.



Jennifer, who works with the wholesalers, says, "Growers love that it responds well to pinching and breaks more frequently than expected at first glance. Our stock has been outperforming our expectations, so we are really pleased that this plant is a very strong new introduction."

Monarch's Promise is the first variegated asclepias available, with colors ranging from beige to white to green to pink to fuchsia. The seed pods are also variegated. (The plant, however, is vegetatively propagated.) It thrives in container gardens and in the landscape. It's a full sun and heat lover, and gets a pink tinge on the leaf tips for extra added character. It looks great in mixed container combinations and as a mass planting in the landscape.

The timing is right to introduce a new asclepias to market. Fifteen years ago, butterfly gardening was hot because everyone wanted butterflies in their gardens. Today there's more urgency behind the rebirth of the trend. Monarch populations are down 90% from their recorded high numbers, in large part due to wholesale eradication of native, wild asclepias species. This milkweed, while not native, is still a beneficial food source for monarchs, something consumers are actively seeking while shopping. It's a plant that not only looks good, but one that consumers can feel good about growing. **GP**

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For information about selling *Asclepias curassavica* Monarch's Promise, contact Jennifer Hatalski at Hort Couture, jenniferhatalski@hortcoutureplants.com.