

8/1/2021

A Metamorphosis

Jennifer Polanz



Jennifer Polanz

Last spring, a teacher at my son's school distributed swamp milkweed seeds (*Asclepias incarnata*) to all fourth-grade students as part of a partnership with local conservationists. We started the seeds and came up with one viable plant, which we planted near our other milkweed plants (*Asclepias tuberosa*).

This summer, much to our excitement, we found a group of three Monarch caterpillars on the swamp milkweed. One survived, and we watched (and worried) as it (he—Skipper—yes, we named him) morphed through the stages and emerged as a beautiful butterfly. Not only was I watching his progress, but I was documenting it on Facebook, and about two dozen of my friends followed along, sharing my wonder at the whole process.

I have three points to this story. One, the connection to schools through gardening and conservation is vital to creating a new generation of gardeners. Everything from teaching the importance of pollinators and native plants to showing how you can grow your own food can inspire younger generations to keep plants in their lives over the long haul. Two, native plants are another way to bring new adult gardeners (and new homeowners) in and talk about the importance of pollinators and conservation efforts. It's not just for kids, y'all—we're all mesmerized by the process.

Three, that butterfly, Skipper, reminds me of this industry. We've undergone a transformation in the past year and a half that resembles that metamorphosis from caterpillar to butterfly. We're not the same as we were in 2019, nor 2020. What are we? Like the Monarch, we're sought after and welcome, a happy feeling in the lives of many.

And while we did see a drop-off in demand this year during the summer, unlike 2020, I anticipate fall will return to the excitement around outdoor activities, particularly if you participate in agri-tourism events like fall festivals, donuts and cider, and other outdoor traditions.

As for the holidays, that's anyone's guess, but we do have some ways to help drive traffic this year. You can find the newest potted and gift plant introductions from the California Summer Trials. And we have e-commerce expert Katie Elzer-Peters providing a detailed look into how retailers can start off small with an online holiday shop.

Before we get to the holidays, though, we have to get through late summer, which is fire season, and this year it's a bad one. We asked long-time contributor Jennifer Duffield White to highlight fire-wise landscapes. If you're out West or in the Northern Midwest, pay attention to these tips.

And, finally, August usually begins the time frame when retailers order products for the following year. When it comes to soils, take a look at Ellen Wells' story on educating consumers about soil health as you place those orders for 2022.

Also, when you place those orders, remember, you're a butterfly, not a caterpillar. You bring joy into the lives of your customers. **GP**