Tropical milkweed

Tropical milkweed (Asclepias curassavica) has a natural range that extends as far north as Mexico, but this plant is not native to the United States or Canada. Tropical milkweed is attractive and easy to grow, so it tends to be the most widely available milkweed at commercial nurseries. Because tropical milkweed historically occurred in the New World tropics, it is adapted to grow year-round in mild climates, whereas most native North American milkweeds die back seasonally and are absent during the winter months. When tropical milkweed is planted in the coastal southern U.S. and California, these plants continue to flower and produce new leaves throughout the fall and winter, except during rare freeze events.

What is OE?

Ophryocystis elektroscirrha (OE) is a debilitating protozoan parasite that infects monarchs. Infected adult monarchs harbor thousands or millions of microscopic OE spores on the outside of their bodies. When dormant spores are scattered onto eggs or milkweed leaves by infected adults, monarch larvae consume the spores, and these parasites then replicate inside the larvae and pupae. Monarchs with severe OE infections can fail to emerge successfully from their pupal stage, either because they become stuck or they are too weak to fully expand their wings. Monarchs with mild OE infections can appear normal but live shorter lives and cannot fly as well as healthy monarchs. Although recent research shows that tropical milkweed can lower OE replication within infected monarchs (due to high levels of cardenolide toxins), this might not benefit the monarch population. In fact, this could actually promote disease spread by allowing moderately infected monarchs that otherwise would have died quickly following eclosion to live longer and spread more parasite spores.

Potential risks of growing exotic (non-native) milkweeds for monarchs

Each fall, monarchs in eastern and western North America migrate to overwintering sites, where they form clusters in trees and stay in a semi-dormant state until the spring. However, some monarchs skip the traditional long-distance migration. In parts of the southern U.S. and California, the year-round persistence of tropical milkweed allows monarchs to breed throughout the winter. These year-round tropical milkweed patches foster greater transmission of the protozoan Ophryocystis elektroscirrha (OE), increasing the likelihood that monarchs become infected with the debilitating parasite. Therefore, we recommend that tropical milkweed (Asclepias curassavica) should be cut back in the winter and fall months in the southern U.S. and California, and should be gradually replaced with native milkweeds as they become available.
What can you do?

• Plant only species of milkweed that are native to your region, whenever possible. The MJV Milkweed Information Sheet (monarchjointventure.org) provides more information on a few priority species for each region of the U.S.

• If you already have tropical milkweed in your garden, prune the milkweed stalks to about 6 inches in height during the fall and winter months to discourage monarchs from establishing winter-breeding colonies*. Cutting back the milkweed will also help to eliminate OE spores that may be present on the plant. Re-cut the milkweed every few weeks as leaves re-sprout. Tropical milkweed might pose fewer problems in the northern monarch breeding range because it dies back naturally when it freezes.

*These recommendations are not applicable in south Florida (south of Orlando), where a distinctive, non-migratory population of monarchs has long been established. However, native milkweed planting is still encouraged in this area.

• Contribute to scientific knowledge about winter-breeding monarchs by participating in citizen science projects. Project Monarch Health involves volunteers in collecting parasite samples from wild monarchs (monarchparasites.org). Observers receive a report on the infection status of all monarchs they sample. Volunteers can also report observations about winter monarch sightings on Journey North (journeynorth.org/monarchs), and collect detailed information on monarch use of milkweed plants in any season for the Monarch Larva Monitoring Project (mlmp.org).