Milkweed has recently gained prominence as a plant that should be grown by all of us, because of its importance in the life cycle of the Monarch butterfly. Every year, Monarchs travel more than a thousand miles from their winter grounds in Mexico to locations throughout the US and Canada in the Spring, and then back to Mexico in the Fall. No single butterfly makes the whole trip north – several generations are born over the Spring and early Summer.

Abundant milkweed is necessary for this migration, because Monarchs cannot use any other plant to lay their eggs on and the caterpillars must eat the milkweed as they grow. The widespread use of Roundup in farm fields made possible by Roundup-ready crops has greatly reduced the amount of milkweed throughout North America over the past ten years, and the Monarch population has plummeted as a result. There is a real possibility that Monarchs could go extinct if nothing changes soon.

One easy way for all of us to help is to plant milkweed gardens in our yards. Milkweed is easy to plant and take care of, and it can be combined with other flowers to make a beautiful butterfly garden. Milkweed plants can either be started from seed or as cuttings (milkweed is a perennial). Start seeds indoors 4 – 8 weeks before transplanting, and set them out after the danger of frost has passed and they are 3 – 6 inches tall. Cuttings from established plants should be coated with rooting hormone and grown for 6 to 10 weeks in potting soil that is kept continuously moist. Milkweed gardens sould be sited in full sun, on light and well-drained soil. There are many different species of milkweed with various geographical distributions, and you should make sure you’re growing ones that are native to your area. Three that are found in Ohio are the common and swamp milkweeds and butterfly weed. Other useful plants that are particularly butterfly friendly include nectar plants for adults such as coneflower, black-eyed susan, zinnias, and marigold. There also are plants that are needed by caterpillars of other butterfly species just as milkweed is used by the Monarchs. Some of these are thistle, hollyhock, snapdragon, dill, parsley, and carrots. With a bit of planning and even a small piece of land, it is easy to make and maintain a beautiful garden that well attract and support many different butterflies all summer long.