GARDENING FOR BUTTERFLIES

Attracting the African Monarch (Danaus chrysippus) to your garden.

Text and illustrations by Jill Reid, Oudtshoorn

The African Monarch is a common and widespread butterfly and can be found throughout the subcontinent wherever its host plants occur. The female will often be seen gliding gracefully around these plants most of which belong to the family Asclepiadaceae.

Just like a housewife at the vegetable counter, she will inspect each leaf carefully for freshness using the sensory cells in her forelegs and antennae. Satisfied, she curls her abdomen under the leaf and plucks a tiny cream coloured egg there. If conditions are right, the lady Monarch may lay up to twenty eggs on one plant and she seems able to judge how many larvae it could support to maturity.

Over a period of about ten days the egg turns brown as the larva develops. On hatching, the distinctive black and white striped larva will eat its egg case for a protein kick-start and then proceed to nibble away at the leaves. At this stage it is extremely vulnerable to predation by spiders and wasps. These insects lay eggs in the larvae that will then carry the eggs until they hatch inside them and provide a convenient first meal for the predator young.

Unlike many other butterfly larvae the African Monarch does not change its colour between skin sheddings (instars). After about twenty days the fat or a pearl-escent white, it has a ring of gold drops near the top and a dusting of gold speckles over the case. Inside, what was

Once a gaudy larva breaks down into a ‘butterfly soup’ of fats, proteins and minerals which genetically rearranges to form a perfect butterfly (complete metamorphosis).
QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

A recently bought a vacant stand in a long-established suburb of Krugersdorp. Apart from a few garden escapes, the vegetation is completely indigenous with lots of protea trees (Protea caffra) and tussocky grasses. That is the way I want it to stay, but after my house was built a local handyman (gardener) decided to help me out while I was away and cleared a large area of the garden, pulling up every living plant by the roots. In due course the area which had received this treatment was a wall-to-wall carpet of blackjacks (Bidens bipinnata).

Rather than pull them out by the roots, leaving bare soil for the cycle to repeat itself, I am letting them grow but pulling off the tops before they seed. This is tedious work and I have no certainty as to what the outcome will be. I would be grateful for help from anyone who has had this problem before.

Paul Asquith, Florida Hills

A The blackjack or in Afrikaans, knapsekrêël Bidens bipinnata is an exotic annual pioneer species that is troublesome from the Western Cape to the Northern Province. Their seeds cling to socks, or any clothing and fur, and spread rapidly. They appear soon after soil disturbance. Generally the germination of weeds is stimulated by moist conditions. I suggest you control the existing young plants chemically with Banweed NCPA, which should save you energy, and in future make use of a mulch that covers the disturbed soil. This mulch should not only prevent germination of the weed seeds but conserve moisture, nourish the soil and prevent soil erosion.

You could also use a paintbrush and spot paint the blackjack plants with Banweed NCPA to prevent other indigenous seedlings from being contaminated. Pulling off the tops of the blackjacks is hard work but can also be effective.

The natural vegetation will eventually return. Planting groundcovers will also retard the germination of weeds.

Ernst van Jaarsveld, Kirstenbosch

If you join the Botanical Society, you will receive a seed list once a year, which entitles you to free packets of surplus seed from the National Botanical Institute. The list has some very useful advice on how to grow your seeds too. If you have any questions about your seeds, write to this column and your query will be answered by one of the horticultural staff at Kirstenbosch and the other National Botanical Gardens.

A mimic of the poisonous African Monarch, the Common Diadem Hypolimnas misippus.

Generally speaking, the female Monarch is larger than the male and is distinctive for the three black spots on its hind wing. The male has a fourth spot (apical patch). During the mating dance the female will flutter her antennae over the patch which stimulates the male ‘perfume’ (pheromones) and induces him to copulate.

Known host plants of the African Monarch are Asclepias species, common roadside weeds, Corospegia, Stapelia, Huernia and Aronjia (members of the milkweed family). All are toxic which makes both larvae and butterflies unpalatable to usual predators such as birds and geckoes and accounts for the leisurely flight of the Monarch. Other palatable butterflies like the Common Diadem (Hypolimnas misippus), the female form of the Mocker Swallowtail (Papilio dardanus) and two species of false acraeas mimic the colouration of their poisonous pal and fly through life unmolested.

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