

# Observer News

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# Planting the way for the return of the monarch

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STAFF WRITER

Eric Stegmaier's love for flying creatures and aviation inspired him to start a butterfly garden last year in his new Southington home. As a local artist, looking at nature's beauty served as a creative source for Stegmaier, who paints in his free time when not working as a senior conservation assistant at the Yale Center for British Art.

"I've always wanted a nice yard to kind of get the artistic juices flowing, so one of the things that's always worked for me is nature," said Stegmaier, who also has experience working as an archaeological illustrator for several excavations in the Middle East. "When [my wife and I] moved into our house, it was a decent yard, but there were certain aspects I wanted to make nicer, and I've always had a thing for butterflies and dragonflies."

But Stegmaier's decision to create a garden would not only drive artistic fuel out of him, but it also served as a site for monarch butterflies. After stumbling upon an online article about the decline of monarch butterflies, Stegmaier decided to create a monarch waystation—a place to offer the butterflies resources needed to create successive generations and to endure their migration, reported Monarch Watch, a nonprofit education, research and conservation program based at the University of Kansas. Throughout their spring and summer breeding areas in North America, monarchs need milkweeds in order to produce these successive generations that culminate in the migration each fall, said Monarch Watch on its website. Likewise, these fall monarchs would not be able to make their long journey to Mexico without nectar from flowers.

"They're near-threatened," Stegmaier said. "It seemed straightforward how to bring them back, and it's just a matter of planting a lot of milkweed, which is pretty easy to grow."

Monarch Watch stated in its population watch report that since 1996, at least 167 acres of monarch

field margins as well as plowed grasslands (including wetlands, rangelands, and some of the last remaining native prairies) to produce more corn and soybeans. Monarch Watch reported that these acres of grasslands once had milkweeds, monarchs and other forms of wildlife.

Last spring, Stegmaier started his creation by buying milkweed clippings, and grew about 24 plants. Although they all sprouted by September last year, Stegmaier said there were not enough plants to sustain a habitat, and so the monarchs did not appear. He added that monarch waystations also require the right combination of plants, including nectar plants and host plants.

"The hardest part was figuring out where to put it because a lot of the plants require direct sunlight, and my yard is sort of shady, so I'm still trying to figure out where to put things," said Stegmaier, adding that he will grow the plants from seed this year instead of the clippings. "You just have to have the right combination of

plants."

When creating a waystation at home, Monarch Watch recommends choosing a sunny, wind-sheltered area for the garden. Once a site is chosen, create a plan of the garden's layout, measuring its dimensions, reported the non-profit program. Shorter plants should be placed in the front while tall plants should appear in the back. Although seeds can be planted in prepared beds outdoors or started in flats indoors, Monarch Watch recommends the latter method the rates of germination are higher indoors. Once seeds begin under artificial lighting indoors or in a greenhouse, they can be transplanted outside after the average date of frost has ended. Seeds started indoors may take four to eight weeks of growing time before they can be transplanted. The seeds should be planted early in the season since those that are planted later in the season may not germinate due to high temperatures. During preparation of the soil bed, Monarch Watch recommended a smooth, clump-free weeded

soil bed to bring a successful establishment of seedling and germination.

Stegmaier will start his seeds indoors this year, and has already purchased grow lamps to set up artificial lighting for the seeds. He also plans on growing hundreds of different plants for the butterfly garden, most of which will be perennials.

"I have it kind of sporadic around the garden because I want them to fly from one place to another," Stegmaier said. "This year, I'm doing a majority of the planting I want to do in my yard and then I think next year will be more butterfly bushes—bigger things."

When managing the garden, Monarch Watch advises not to use any pesticides, which will have a negative effect on the caterpillars and butterflies. The non-profit program also recommended "deep watering" the plants weekly for an hour or two at a time by using a soaker hose or sprinkler, followed by a "lack of water in the soil near the surface," which



ARVIND BALARAMAN

A Monarch butterfly.

makes plants stronger and healthier. Dried seeds should be stored in a cool, dry place in a reclosable plastic bag or other container.

"There's a certain amount of satisfaction that I get growing things from scratch," said Stegmaier, who has a passion for nature, history and literature. "It's that natural cycle—watching it unfold and being a part of it."

Monarch waystations varying in sizes exist throughout the nation, including Connecticut. Individuals who create a monarch habitat can

have it become certified as an official Monarch Waystation. After certification, the site will be included in an online database of Monarch Waystations, and individuals who apply will receive a certificate with an identification number for their site. "I haven't really advertised too much what I'm doing, and I'm hoping this is a first step in that direction," said Stegmaier, who grew up in Plainville most of his life. "It would be good to get the town involved in something like that."



A painting called 'Morning's Glory,' by Eric Stegmaier, a local artist of Southington who mostly grew up in Plainville. Stegmaier has demonstrated his love of nature by creating a monarch waystation at home to help preserve the habitat of monarch butterflies.

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