

Horticulture Hints

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My cabbages, Brussels sprouts, broccoli and beets are doing beautifully despite the freezes. Oh, and I forgot the kale. It, too, is doing beautifully. All of them survived the hard Christmas freeze as well as the frost of a few weeks ago. I believe in my last newsletter I mentioned that broccoli was developed some time ago from kale. So when I harvested my first broccoli flower, I decided to take some of the leaves that hadn't frozen as well. I sautéed them all together, and it was delicious. The leaves seemed to need about the same amount of time to cook as the florets, and were a little less chewy than kale leaves. But with that wonderful broccoli flavor. I look forward to harvesting my next broccoli.

As promised, I'm going to give you a little information on cyclamen (Cyclamen persicum), which are in stores right now, in full bloom. Their native habitat is the



Cyclamen bulbs and leaves

Mediterranean. Which seems a little counter intuitive, considering that they like (here in Florida) woodland kinds of settings. The flowers remind me of shooting stars, and have been hybridized in all colors from deep red to pale pink to white. The leaves are as nice as the flowers, heart shaped with silver-

green spots following the outline of the heart. They are generally treated as cool season annuals, since the plant goes completely dormant in the heat of summer. Most people discard them at that point, but I have had them for several seasons. As soon as the weather begins to cool in the fall, the leaves start to come out again with flowers following shortly behind. I leave them outside in pots in dappled shade, and keep them moist throughout the year. Start fertilizing as soon as leaves appear, and you'll have a beautiful plant for the beginning of the year. I do bring them in when freezes threaten, but other than that, they have been outside the whole year. The experts seem to agree that they really don't make good houseplants, as they need good air circulation, and can be a little finicky about their living conditions. But I have found them to be a little tougher than that, albeit in outdoor conditions.

There has been much discussion of late (since 2015, really) about the use of tropical milkweed used in yards to feed and support monarch butterflies in their fight for survival. In January 2015, project findings were published by the University of Georgia citing the fact that non-migrating monarchs were five times more likely to contract a protozoan parasite called by the unpronounceable name of *Ophryocystis elektroscirrha*, or the much more comfortable term OE. Now this is a very complex issue, and there are still a lot of unanswered questions about it. But for those of you who are not familiar with this issue, I will attempt to explain.

Monarchs have been having a tough time for awhile now, with their habitat shrinking, and the overuse of insecticides. People wanting to help have jumped in with both feet, planting milkweed everywhere they can. But herein lies the rub: tropical milkweed

((*Asclepias curassavica*) has come to the rescue. This stuff is easy to grow, drought tolerant, and re-seeds readily. Just what the doctor ordered, right? Unfortunately, no. Tropical milkweed seems to stand through freezes and just about everything short of the apocalypse. That would be lovely except for the aforementioned OE.

Just about all living things, as far as I can tell, have a small number of parasites, bacteria, or other nasties living with them, either on their skin or in their gut. It becomes a problem when the nasties reach a point of severe overgrowth. A small number of OE are normal and healthy for the monarch. All monarchs have them. When the butterfly lands on a milkweed leaf, a minuscule



Monarch, weakened by OE, unable to emerge properly from its cocoon

number are transferred to the leaf, where they can then be picked up by the next butterfly to land. This is all well and good, until that milkweed doesn't die back in the

fall, and the OE have continued to live on green leaves. There are just that many more on the leaf for the next year, when the caterpillars ingest them when they start hatching and munching on the leaves. This leads to an overgrowth of the parasite, which can lead to weakness in the newly hatching butterfly. They may have deformed wings, be unable to sip nectar, or just simply not have enough strength to work their way out of the cocoon, or be able to flatten their wings after having done so. If they live, they don't live long.

So, what do we do? If you have tropical milkweed, you could, of course, pull it all up and plant native. We'll get to that in a minute. If you have invested in tropical milkweed, and have a nice patch of it that you're not willing to replace, the solution is simple: in the fall, cut it all back to about five inches above the ground. Be sure to burn the cuttings. You don't want late-mating butterflies to inadvertently get a hold of it.

The other solution is also simple on the surface: plant native. But native plants aren't always easy to find. Seeds may be easier, but starting milkweed seeds is notoriously iffy, as well as possibly expensive. I, myself, haven't had good luck at all starting seeds. Which is why I started buying tropical in the first place. These are the *Asclepias* that are native to our area: Swamp Milkweed (*A. incarnata*), Butterfly Weed (*A. tuberosa*), Whorled Milkweed (*A. verticillata*), White Milkweed (*A. variegata*), Aquatic Milkweed (*A. perennis*), Sandhill Milkweed (*A. humistrata*). Despite the fact that these are all native here in Florida, they are *much* more difficult to get a hold of, and may be difficult to raise to maturity. Add the fact that they don't like to be moved because of their long taproot, so you better get them in the right place to begin with. In the next newsletter, I will go into a bit more detail about each of these. In the meantime, if you would like more information on butterflies in general, I have included a link in the email to which this newsletter is attached.