

Grow Native Bella Vista: Building Monarch Habitat in Bella Vista

Monarch Waystation Program Encourages Residents to Create Native Plant Gardens That Support Monarch Butterflies, Pollinators, and Local Biodiversity While Enhancing the Beauty and Ecological Health of Bella Vista Neighborhoods

By Ginny Vance, President, Grow Native Bella Vista

What began in May as a new garden club with a passion for native plants has quickly grown into something much larger - a community effort to make Bella Vista a more welcoming place for pollinators, wildlife and people.

Grow Native Bella Vista Garden Club was founded with a simple mission: to educate, inspire and encourage our neighbors to incorporate native plants into their landscapes while creating beautiful, environmentally responsible gardens. Our philosophy is reflected in our motto: "Helping Neighbors One Yard at a Time."

In June, that mission took another exciting step forward with the launch of the Bella Vista Monarch Waystation Program, in conjunction with the City of Bella Vista's proclamation recognizing Bella Vista as a registered Monarch City.

The program encourages residents to create welcoming habitat for monarch butterflies by growing milkweed - the only plant on which monarchs lay their eggs - along with nectar-rich flowers that provide food for adult butterflies and other pollinators. Participating gardens are also maintained without pesticides.

Already, seven Bella Vista homes have been certified through the program, proving that helping monarchs doesn't require acres of land. It can begin right outside your own front door.

A Garden Filled With Life

One of those certified gardens belongs to Julie Okeefe, located at 65 Ruthwell Drive, whose colorful landscape is a wonderful example of how one gardener can make a difference.

Julie moved to Bella Vista from Texas four years ago, but her love of gardening began much earlier. "My mother got me interested in gardening," Julie said.

Today, her garden has evolved into a colorful mixture of cutting gardens, cottage-style plantings, native plants and pollinator habitat.

Ask Julie what she loves most about her garden, and she points to the pollinator garden in front of her home, where she works to have something blooming from February through October.

Her favorite flowers include Phlox and Joe Pye weed, but at this time of year another familiar flower is stealing the show. "Zinnias," Julie said. "The brighter the better!" Butterflies and other pollinators seem to agree.

Julie's garden is constantly changing as she learns and experiments. What began as a cutting garden expanded into a cottage-style garden, and she recently added a new native-plant shade area. "I garden for pollinators because it gives me great joy," she said.

Discovering the Monarch Story

Becoming part of the Bella Vista Monarch Waystation Program has opened another chapter in Julie's gardening journey. She initially wanted to widen her understanding of monarchs simply because they are so beautiful. But the more she learned, the more remarkable their story became.

Monarchs travel thousands of miles during their migration, including the extraordinary journey to their overwintering grounds in Mexico. Julie also learned one of the most important lessons for anyone hoping to help them: monarchs need milkweed to reproduce because it is the only plant their caterpillars can eat.

Julie grows common milkweed in her garden, while swamp milkweed grows naturally in the ditch surrounding her property.

During our recent interview, we received the perfect reminder of why those plants matter. As we walked through Julie's garden, something caught our attention on her milkweed. There it was - a monarch caterpillar, happily munching away.

It was a small moment, but an exciting one. The very habitat Julie had intentionally created was doing exactly what it was supposed to do. A recent monarch butterfly visiting her garden provided another beautiful confirmation that her yard has become part of a much larger journey.

Start Small

Julie has practical advice for people who look at an established garden and wonder where they could possibly begin by starting small.

"Focus on one area at a time so you have a sense of accomplishment," she advises. She recommends improving the soil with compost at least twice a year and paying attention to soil amendments. She also encourages gardeners to read plant tags carefully, particularly for proper spacing, growing conditions and planting zones.

It's a reminder that a pollinator garden doesn't have to happen overnight. One small bed, a few native nectar plants and some milkweed can be the beginning.

The Best Seat in the Garden

For all the work that goes into creating her landscape, Julie's favorite way to enjoy it is wonderfully simple. In the morning, she likes to sit on her front porch, surrounded by the garden, watching the birds, butterflies and other activity unfolding around her.

And what makes her smile? Flowers blooming.

Julie sums up her connection to gardening with a simple thought: "God is in the garden." And she has another philosophy that will probably make fellow plant lovers smile: "People who say you have too many plants are not my people!"

One Yard at a Time

Julie's garden is just one of seven Bella Vista homes currently certified through the Bella Vista Monarch Waystation Program, but each garden represents something important.

When one homeowner plants milkweed, another adds native nectar plants, and another decides to stop using pesticides, those individual yards begin to connect into a larger network of habitat. That is exactly what Grow Native Bella Vista hopes to accomplish.

We want residents to know they don't need a perfect garden or a huge landscape to participate. They simply need a willingness to start. Perhaps it begins with one patch of milkweed. Perhaps it is a few nectar-rich native flowers.

And perhaps one morning, just as we experienced in Julie's garden, you will look closely at a leaf and discover a monarch caterpillar munching away. That is when you realize your garden has become more than a beautiful place. It has become habitat.

PHOTO SUBMISSIONS

1. Julie OKeefe portrait: Julie OKeefe is one of seven Bella Vista homeowners currently certified through the Bella Vista Monarch Waystation Program.

2. Front pollinator garden: Julie's front pollinator garden is designed to provide blooms from February through October.

3. Monarch caterpillar on milkweed: A monarch caterpillar was discovered feeding on milkweed during Julie OKeefe's interview - a perfect example of the habitat the Bella Vista Monarch Waystation Program hopes to create throughout the community.

4. Monarch visiting Julie's garden: A monarch butterfly visits Julie Okeefe's certified Monarch Waystation Garden in Bella Vista.

5. Butterflies on zinnias: Bright zinnias are among the busiest flowers in Julie's garden this time of year, attracting butterflies and other pollinators.

6. Favorite plants: Phlox and Joe Pye weed are among Julie Okeefe's favorite garden plants.

7. Monarch Waystation certificate: Julie Okeefe Monarch Waystation certificate recognizes her garden's contribution to monarch and pollinator habitat in Bella Vista.

ABOUT GROW NATIVE BELLA VISTA

Grow Native Bella Vista encourages residents to learn about native plants, create pollinator habitat and make environmentally responsible choices in their own landscapes - helping neighbors one yard at a time.

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