

# Native milkweed for monarch butterfly recovery

BY SUZIE SAVOIE

Monarch butterflies that live east of the continental divide embark on a spectacular annual migration to winter roost sites in oyamel trees in the mountains of Michoacán, Mexico. In 2013 the World Wildlife Fund-Telcel Alliance and Mexico's National Commission of Protected Areas found that "the nine hibernating colonies [in Mexico] occupy a total area of 2.94 acres of forest—representing a 59 percent decrease from the 2011-2012 survey of 7.14 acres."

Monarch butterflies that live west of the continental divide, including monarchs that migrate through the Applegate Valley, overwinter in various groves of trees along the central and southern California coast. The International Environmental Law Project released a report in 2012, *The Legal Status of Monarch Butterflies in California*, which states that "observations from annual counts of overwintering butterflies in California reveal monarch population declines of approximately 90 percent across most sites with some sites faring significantly worse."

There are many reasons for this significant decline, including agricultural and urban development, pesticides, logging of overwintering habitat in Mexico, climate change, and loss of milkweed, the main food source for monarch larvae.

Milkweed has long had a bad rap because of its potential toxicity to livestock. Many farmers consider the plant a weed and either spray it with herbicides or simply plow it under; however, female monarch butterflies lay their eggs exclusively on the leaves of milkweed plants. These host plants

are the only food that monarch caterpillars will eat. As the caterpillars ingest milkweed the toxins in the plant are stored in their bodies, making the caterpillars and adults toxic to many predators.

The Applegate Valley is home to three native species of milkweed: showy milkweed (*Asclepias speciosa*), narrowleaf milkweed (*Asclepias fascicularis*), and purple milkweed (*Asclepias cordifolia*).

**Showy milkweed** can be spotted in the Applegate along roadsides, in drainage ditches, in unplowed fields, and other locations within the valley bottom. This species ranges from the Midwest to the West Coast and north into Canada. This is the largest of the milkweed species in the Applegate and the most common. Showy milkweed is considered one of the least toxic milkweeds.

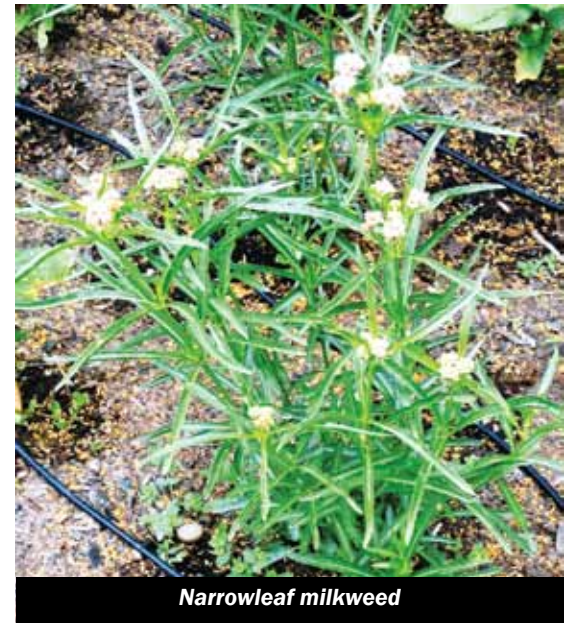
**Narrowleaf milkweed** is found mainly in the eastern part of the Applegate Valley as it transitions into the Rogue Valley, where it is more common. It has a long, narrow leaf and small, pale pink flowers with a distribution that includes most western states down to Baja California. This plant is rhizomatous and spreads readily. It prefers to grow in full sun with dry or moist conditions.

**Purple milkweed** is a spectacularly beautiful species that is native to parts of California, Nevada and Oregon. Purple milkweed has a more dispersed distribution within the Applegate than the showy or narrowleaf milkweed and is less well-known. Purple milkweed prefers to grow on rocky slopes or outcrops in woodland and coniferous forests. In the Applegate

it can be found mainly in the foothills, with known populations in the Upper Applegate and Little Applegate. Native Americans used the fiber in milkweed plants for the creation of ropes and nets. Anthropologists found a 40-foot-long deer net made from purple milkweed that required an estimated 35,000 plant stalks to construct.

The monarch population continues to decline at an alarming rate. If we don't act soon to increase, protect and restore monarch habitat, we may see the population of this majestic and iconic species dwindle.

A Monarch and Milkweed workshop is scheduled for April 24, 2014, at the Oregon State University Extension. Call Jane Moyer at 541-665-0792 for details.



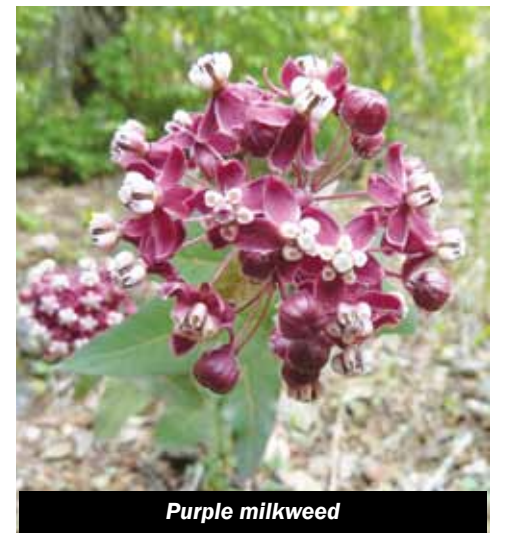
Narrowleaf milkweed

Tom Landis, a retired forest service nursery specialist, is leading this workshop. One topic will be the creation of monarch "way stations" and the promotion of monarch habitat restoration by planting milkweed and nectar plants.

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Showy milkweed



Purple milkweed



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