

## Worried about insects on your milkweeds?

By Sally Snidow

The fact that Monarch butterflies need pesticide-free milkweed (*Asclepias* species) on which to lay their eggs is well known. Although there are many *Asclepias* species available, the most common milkweed species in our area are *A. syriaca* (common milkweed), *A. incarnata* (swamp milkweed), and *A. tuberosa* (butterflyweed) and Monarchs use them all.

But Monarch butterflies are not alone in their use of this beautiful plant family. If you observe your milkweed plants carefully, you will undoubtedly notice some colorful insects on the leaves and stems. The most common of these are the large milkweed bugs (*Oncopeltus fasciatus*), milkweed leaf beetles (*Labidomera clivicollis*) and milkweed aphids (*Aphis nerii*). As their common names imply, these insects feed on the milkweed seeds and plant juices accumulating toxic glycosides in their bodies that protect them from predators.

These brightly colored milkweed bugs and leaf beetles use the same orange and black visual warning that Monarchs use to discourage predators. The little yellow aphids are not quite predator-proof, and their numbers are kept in check by small wasps and ladybug beetles.

These creatures do no serious damage to the plants or to the Monarch caterpillars, so there is no need to worry about them. But if you feel that your plants are being stressed by an unusually large number of these insects, or just want to keep their populations under control, simply use a small brush to knock the insects off or shoot a strong water stream on them to wash them away. If using the water method, do it first thing in the morning when the sun can dry the leaves quickly to keep them healthy. Research shows that such mechanical methods are as effective as *any* pesticide and will not poison the plants for Monarch caterpillars as systemic chemical pesticides do. *Be aware, however, that when using these otherwise harmless methods, you may be knocking off Monarch eggs and small larvae. So be careful with hose or brush.*

Whatever you do, do NOT use chemical pesticides. Neonicotinoids, the most common chemical pesticides in use today, can persist in the soil for 500 days or more, invading all parts of the plant. Studies show that after only one or two applications, plants grown in chemically treated soil can produce toxic leaves, stems, pollen, nectar and transpiration droplets – everything an insect might use – for more than two growing seasons. Monarch caterpillars who try to live and grow on treated plants will die.

Extensive research has indicated such a strong connection between the use of these pesticides and honey bee colony collapse disorder (CCD) that several European countries, including France, Germany and Italy, have restricted the use of agricultural neonicotinoids. And according to entomologist James Frazier of Penn State University, the amount of neonicotinoids used in homeowner products for backyard plants is *40 times greater* than anything allowable in agricultural systems.

Use of these toxins not only kills the Monarchs and other valuable insects and pollinators, but also makes the general environment less healthy for us, our children and our pets. Now *that's* something to be worried about.