

Butterfly Garden Notes by Judith Wagner (Butterfly Benefactor)

We are close to the end of the third season of Saint Mark's Butterfly Garden, located on the upper parking lot side near the kitchen at the back of the Church. When we started in the spring of 2014, we chose a site that (we thought) would be inaccessible to deer and inhospitable to rabbits. Our goal was to provide a mix of good nectar and host plants that could flourish with minimal upkeep on a dry hill facing the western afternoon sun.

Church volunteers cleared out a mess of overgrown weeds and planted a number of perennials known to attract bees and butterflies. We watered and weeded as necessary through the seasons, and added plants as energy and resources allowed.

Today, the garden contains a variety of perennial plants that are important host and nectar sources for butterflies and their caterpillars. The garden contains 18 different kinds of plants, in various stages of health and vigor. One challenge has been milkweed, the only plant on which the Monarch butterfly will lay eggs. You would think that milkweed would be easy to grow, considering that corn farmers view them as major weeds. Nope! They are vulnerable to all sorts of icky pests and plant diseases, and just for good measure, the rabbits of Saint Mark decided this spring that they were good nibbles. They defoliated all of the young shoots. You may have noticed a round cage for one plant near the stairs. That's an anti-rabbit device installed by Dave Bennet that seems to have saved it. But, to be a true Monarch garden, we need 10 or more thriving milkweed plants, planted close to one another. Wait to next year!

This fall, we are leaving most of the plants to die naturally and lie quietly through the winter. Experts say that the dead plants are a good winter mulch that keeps the soil in place and provide winter shelter for birds.

A few people have done most of the volunteering in the past year, and the loss of Carol Wood to Arizona at the end of last season has stressed us in many ways, not least of which is missing her watering and weeding throughout the summer. Last fall, shortly before she moved away, Carol and friends installed a lovely plaque in the top corner of the garden. It reminds us of what a little bit of care can do to help the smallest of God's creatures.

We need more help if the garden is to flourish as a source of nectar for pollinators and as a host plant for native butterflies. If you would like to spend a few days of time starting next spring to help with spring cleanup, or periodic weeding, or watering on hot days, email Alison Bennett Alison.bennett72@gmail.com.