

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Production

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Finding Common Ground on Milkweed

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Most days I consider myself lucky to work for a vertically integrated company where the production and the retail divisions work in harmony, bringing quality products to the grateful, interested and passionate gardening world. Our company provides me with the benefit of working directly with retail associations, sales representatives, greens and resort superintendents, and the retail's customers. These groups bring different industry perspectives from their knowledge base, concerns, product uses and information needs.

I recently had the pleasure corresponding via email with a Monarch butterfly enthusiast and advocate who expressed concerns about our asclepias crop. Asclepias has become the hottest, yet most controversial, perennial on the market, with a customer base almost as divided as our country's political climate.

One group thinks that tropical asclepias (species *curassavica*) shouldn't be planted because it's a non-California native that doesn't go dormant and is thought to prevent Monarchs from moving along their migration path, thus disrupting their entire life cycle and creating further decline. The other group thinks that tropical milkweed deserves its place in gardens, being easy to grow, relatively pest free and that any migration issues are solved by cutting the plants back in the fall. Easy.

In response to these two very vocal groups, we opt to grow tropical milkweed and here I must add that we grow our milkweed COMPLETELY CHEMICAL FREE (I meant to write that in capital letters) in a segregated greenhouse where there's no risk of chemical contamination. Our tag copy urges customers to cut their asclepias back in the fall, freeing the Monarchs to continue their migration.

We also grow the native varieties, but they perform poorly in production and look wretched at retail. Our divisions have jointly communicated our asclepias growing practices to the world at large and this has satisfied most of our customer base with the exception of the Monarch activists.

The Monarch enthusiasts have proven no different from our other customer groups by providing their unique perspective on our industry, along with correspondence backed up by research and personal experience. However, the one sticking point is the refusal to believe that we don't treat our asclepias with anything while disregarding other factors that contribute to the failure and death of a Monarch caterpillar or chrysalis.

If you Google "Diseases of Monarch Butterflies," the first two on the list are tachinid flies and *Ophryocystis elektroscirrha* (OE), a parasite that infects Monarchs. Number three on the list is tainted milkweed. As growers, we understand why we're growing the crop in such large quantities and what consumers are doing with it. That's why we made the decision to grow what is basically an organic crop, although it's more difficult to produce.

Since many Monarch enthusiasts raise their broods in pens, it makes sense that a non-sanitized environment allows the OE to proliferate rather than an unscrupulous grower sending chemically tainted plants to market. The difficulty is alerting people to this issue without assigning blame. From a production background, it seems obvious that an unsanitary growth environment will lead to pest problems. For home gardeners and Monarch hobbyists, a tainted plant is easier to blame than understanding that many plants and insects need sanitary environments to thrive.

In my correspondence to a Monarch caterpillar advocate, we discussed the untimely demise of several caterpillar generations and whether our crops contributed to the issue. I expressed my sympathies and responded, outlining our practices and even invited the customer to our growing grounds so they could see our practices firsthand.

If you've ever raised Monarchs from egg to butterfly, you know how sad it is when they die before becoming a butterfly. I totally get it. Unfortunately, the conversation remained focused on the possibility we were selling tainted asclepias, accusations were made and feelings hurt. I left work that day feeling bad about the exchange and seeking some clarity. Later, I realized that I felt my company's integrity was being called into question, but only because the customer genuinely cared, wanted to help the Monarch's cause and wanted to ensure the health of her caterpillars' food supply. The next day, I emailed her back explaining how seriously we take our growing practices, stewardship and industry mission, along with an apology for the escalated emails. Her response was overwhelming gracious and we electronically hugged it out.

We serve a diverse clientele and staying on top of or anticipating their needs is challenging, but rewarding. In the instance of my correspondence with the Monarch butterfly advocate, I saw an opportunity to educate a different part of our customer base about our practices and objectives. When that ran a bit off the rails, I apologized, but inevitably got through to her.

An anonymous quote reads, "Apologizing does not mean you are wrong and the other person is right. It means that you value the relationship more than your ego." I think a lot of us can agree with that quote. **GT**

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