



by Marilyn Pease, HCMG

## THE FLIGHT OF THE MONARCH

As Master Gardeners, I am sure we are all aware of the amazing long-distance migration of the North American monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*). Some of us have even been lucky enough to visit their wintering spot in the El Rosario fir forests in the mountains of Mexico. However, there are some interesting facts behind this miracle of nature that need to be explored.



**Newly emerged  
Monarch**

Here in Kerrville at 30 degrees latitude we can expect monarchs to be passing through between October 10 to October 22. The monarch can fly as much as 265 miles per day with an average of 50 miles a day. What is truly amazing is that only the last generations of monarchs born per season do the actual migration. In late summer and early fall, the third and/or fourth generations are born biologically different. They are engineered not to reproduce but to start storing fat in their abdomens (like some of us MGs) in preparation for the long journey.

There are several ongoing projects that monitor monarch migration. One is at the University of Kansas that sponsors a citizen science group that tags monarchs in the fall as they are on their way to Mexico. One of our own Master Gardeners, Tom Collins, has participated in a monarch tagging operation locally and kindly supplied the monarch tag photo. The tag itself is 9 mm in diameter and is of soft plastic with an adhesive back. It lists on it a code, location, date, and sex of the butterfly. The information on the tag is relayed back to the university when and if the monarch is seen again. If you are interested in tagging monarchs in 2011 go to [www.monarchwatch.org](http://www.monarchwatch.org).



Tagged →  
butterfly

A second monarch monitoring project is at the University of Minnesota that concentrates more on the larval stage of the monarch and examines milkweed patches for signs of monarch eggs (the females lay one egg at a time with up to 100 eggs per plant) and larvae. Our local Texas Master Naturalist group can provide training for larval monitoring or visit [www.mlmp.org](http://www.mlmp.org) for more information.

Interestingly, there is a similar species of African monarch (*Danaus chrysippus*) that does not migrate at all. Also, our North American monarch, in 200 years of recorded observations, has colonized Hawaii, Fiji, Australia and New Zealand presumably by hitching rides on ships. These transplants have lost their migration trait as their new homes are warm all the time, alleviating the need to migrate.



Monarch Nursery

Thanks again to Master Gardener **Tom Collins** for photos and additional information. He also relayed that he would be willing to give a program on monarchs to us this coming year (and maybe point out the differences between males and females!)



Male



Female