

Neighbours and Nature Ensemble: First of its Kind in Ottawa

By Mary Ash

What do retired Monarch Teacher Network (MTN) teachers do when they no longer have a classroom in which to raise Monarchs? They create butterfly gardens and start educating their community. This is exactly what Mary Ash, Joan Harvey, Johanna Cutts, and Kate Harrigan did. Neighbours and Nature Ensemble (NNE), a bilingual name chosen from community suggestions, and reflective of the community spirit and involvement, is the first of its kind within the City of Ottawa whereby a private citizen's group has constructed a garden on city property.

The NNE Monarch Waystation adheres to the standards laid out by Monarch Watch www.monarchwatch.org and contains native plants, both host (milkweeds: for eggs and caterpillars to live on), as well as nectar (flowering/perching plants: for adult butterflies); the whole is a self-contained unit specific to the Monarch, but attracts other butterflies, moths, hummingbirds and pollinators, especially bees. Grants for plants, soil, and a rain barrel were obtained with the help of the local councillor, and a local nursery offered to subsidize their purchases. Neighbours, even children, pitched in to help in many ways.

The site for the garden in Terry Fox Park in Orléans was a former Boy Scout/Girl Guide campfire circle, abandoned for many years, and was the perfect spot. A bench at the entrance to the garden offers passers-by a spot to rest as they observe the goings



Jim Norgaard

on, take in the aroma, or listen to the hum of busy bees; and it is anticipated that teachers at nearby Terry Fox Elementary School will utilize the garden when teaching habitat, and other science units. Monarchs depend on a unique partnership between the United States, Canada and Mexico for their survival – we “share” the butterflies; a problem in any country will break the necessary chain upon which their existence is based. Pesticides, herbicides, genetically modified crops, urban expansion, deforestation in the overwintering sites in the mountains of Mexico, all have devastating effects on this tiny migratory insect whose present numbers recently showed an improvement.

The retired MTNers hoped that others would take the initiative to develop similar gardens in their yards. As such, a new seniors residence has shown interest in having a butterfly garden onsite; the local Lions Club is incorporating a waystation in their new garden plan; and the local councillor has requested that Mary and Joan assist him in creating such a garden in a seniors' park. Due to liability issues, Monarch Teacher Network – Ottawa Chapter adopted the part of the park containing the garden to facilitate the process.

The gals were overwhelmed with the resulting bonding of their neighbourhood during and after their garden construction: neighbours helping neighbours, moreover, neighbours *meeting* neighbours, and uniting for a local cause. One neighbour offered to be the “resident photographer;” another volunteered his water until the rain barrel could be set up in his yard; many came to spread soil, mulch, and plant. The garden became a focal point in the area, a gathering place, a destination for morning walks; and everywhere people talked about “the garden.” After two summers in operation, the garden has attracted butterflies as well as hundreds of bees and other pollinators, and hummingbirds. What a superb start! It's been said that “When a butterfly flaps its wings in one part of the world, it can cause a hurricane in another;” well it's amazing how a little butterfly has certainly created a stir in this neighbourhood!

Mary Ash is a retired elementary school teacher who has always been close to nature. She joined Monarch Teacher Network in 2004 and has been a kindred spirit, inspiring others, ever since.



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