

Conservation Forum

For and by members of PGC - Sandy Menke, Conservation Chair

From the History Books: The Milkweed Plant – A Lifesaver

As gardeners and naturalists our current concern is the renewal of the Monarch butterfly's natural habitat by planting milkweed. In fact, **Milkweed for Monarchs** has been designated as the Garden Clubs of Illinois President's Project for 2015. But the Milkweed plant is not only vital to the Monarch's survival; it has a place in history because it aided the survival of our troops during WWII.



In 1942 military planners turned to the Milkweed plant as a much-needed raw material for use in life preservers for airmen and sailors. Well before the use of synthetic fibers, the value of milkweed floss lay in its buoyancy. Initially the armed forces used kapok in the manufacture of life preservers. Floss from the Kapok tree has strands of cotton-like fiber much like the Milkweed plant, and a large quantity of this floss was used for life preservers and flight suits. However, when the Japanese gained control of what is now Indonesia they cut off the main U.S. supply of kapok floss from that country. Milkweed proved to be an acceptable substitute, however, it would take three years to produce a commercial crop.



But there was a generous supply already growing wild in the U. S. countryside. Consequently the government put out a call throughout the country for collection of milkweed seedpods. In Illinois and other states, schoolchildren were called upon to help because labor at that time was concerned with the war effort. There were many more farms and country schools back then, so inviting children to help turned out to be an ingenious idea. Children were given onion sacks to carry the collected pods, and they received 15 cents per bag with an additional five cents if the pods were dried. Two bags of pods contained enough floss for one life jacket. The call went out for two million pounds of floss nationally, enough to fill 1.2 million life jackets.

Wartime pamphlets encouraged schoolchildren to gather milkweed: ***“School children of America! Help save your fathers’, brothers’, and neighbors’ lives by collecting milkweed pods.”*** The slogan, ***“Two bags save one life”*** was also popular. In small and large schools teachers and their pupils spent hours foraging roadsides, railroad right-of-ways and fencerows looking for the milkweed plants. Some schools, such as those in McLean County, IL, even had contests. All told, McLean County schools collected 1,900 sacks, which were then shipped by rail to Petoskey, Michigan, home of a milkweed floss processing plant. Nationwide, more than 1.5 billion pods were collected to make 1.2 million life vests!

World War II required many sacrifices of the general public – large and small. Ration cards, scrap drives, war bonds and victory gardens were common everywhere, and hundreds of schoolchildren also helped the war effort by walking fencerows, on the lookout for milkweed. The native plant that once was called “just a weed” became a natural lifesaver just as it would be in the 21st century as it helps to save the Monarch.

By **Karen Boyce**

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