

## Marin bans sale of tropical milkweed to protect monarch butterflies

By **WILL HOUSTON** | whouston@marinij.com |

PUBLISHED: August 30, 2022 at 5:26 p.m. | UPDATED: September 1, 2022 at 7:05 a.m.



Elizabeth Blackstone of West End Nursery, left, chats with customer Ann Brenner of Ross while Brenner selects a pair of milkweed plants at West End Nursery in San Rafael on Tuesday, Aug. 30, 2022. (Sherry LaVars/Marin Independent Journal)





A monarch butterfly lands on a plant at West End Nursery in San Rafael on Tuesday, Aug. 30, 2022. Marin County is banning local nurseries from selling tropical milkweed in order to protect the dwindling populations of monarch butterflies. (Sherry LaVars/Marin Independent Journal)

Marin County has become one of the first counties in California to ban the sale of a weed that researchers say threatens the survival of the dwindling western monarch butterfly.

The decision by Marin Agricultural Commissioner Stefan Parnay this month to ban the sale of tropical milkweed, known as *Asclepias curassavica*, comes after the California Department of Agriculture recently recategorized the species as a noxious weed that is known to cause harm to the environment or economy. The designation allows county agricultural commissioners to ban on the sale or propagation of the plant.

"We want to thank the nursery staffs for their understanding and assistance in helping us protect the monarch butterflies," Parnay said in a statement announcing the ban this month. "Their customers can play an important role by buying native milkweeds and native nectar plants that will improve the health of pollinators. Planting native plants is the way to go."

Marin joins Ventura County, which enacted a similar ban earlier this summer.

Milkweed is vital for the survival of monarch butterflies as it is the only plant they will lay their eggs on along their long annual migration between Baja California to British Columbia. The hatched caterpillars eat the leaves, which also imbues them with the plant's protective toxin.

However, tropical milkweed, which is native to the Caribbean, Mexico and Central America, can carry a microscopic protozoan parasite that can affect monarch butterflies' migration success and lifespan. Additionally, tropical milkweed does not die off during the winter as native milkweed does, which can confuse butterflies and cause them to breed when they should be migrating or overwintering during that time of year.

California Department of Agriculture spokesman Steve Lyle said tropical milkweed was not rated as a pest until this year. Lyle said it was recategorized this year "as its planting helps concentrate and spread a fatal bacterial disease of monarch butterflies."

Marin Assistant Agricultural Commissioner Scott Wise said while the county has the authority to issue the ban, it does not want to impose economic hardship on businesses if it can be helped.

"In this case, there are alternatives like the native milkweed. It's sort of an easy switch," Wise said. "They're all in it for the butterfly too at the point of sale. It's a charismatic insect. People love it. I love it."

Some local nursery owners said they support the ban. Dave Stoner, president of Sloat Garden Center, said he will be ending the sale of tropical milkweed at not only his four Marin locations but all of his stores, including those in San Francisco and Contra Costa counties, starting next year.

"We have no issues with it whatsoever," Stoner said. "We're not going to carry it in the other counties regardless of their policies on it."

Chris Untermann, owner of the West End Nursery in San Rafael, said he had already stopped selling tropical milkweed prior to the ban.





As a native plant nursery, the O'Donnell's Fairfax Nursery in Fairfax has been working to educate residents about the benefits of planting native versus tropical milkweed. Nursery propagation manager Bayley Elenzweig said now is the best time of year for residents to replace tropical milkweed in their yard with native milkweed.



A milkweed plant sits on a table at West End Nursery in San Rafael on Tuesday, Aug. 30, 2022. (Sherry LaVars/Marin Independent Journal)

Native milkweed can take about one to two years to establish, but is relatively easy to care for and has evolved with the monarch butterflies, she said.

"There is a kind of a false pretense in the selling of the tropical milkweed that it is helping with the monarchs," Elenzweig said. "It's borne of good intentions but when they realize they're not, it's pretty easy to draw people into building this ecosystem back to what it once was."

Researchers have sounded the alarm about the collapse of monarch butterfly populations in recent years. Once estimated to number up to 4.5 million, the western population of the iconic orange-and-black-winged insect has fallen by a staggering 99% since the 1980s, according to the state.

In the winter of 2020, fewer than 2,000 monarch butterflies were counted in the west, according to the Xerces Society of Invertebrate Conservation, which oversees the counts. While the 2021 count of nearly 250,000 brought a sigh of relief, researchers say the declining trend of the population will likely continue unless threats are addressed.

Pesticide use, degradation of overwintering habitat, loss of the nectar and milkweed plants the butterflies use for food and breeding, and climate change have all been cited as reasons for the decline.

In Marin, only 141 monarch butterflies were observed in the winter of 2020-2021, down from a record 38,700 counted in 2015. The count for 2021-2022 saw a minor improvement with 180 butterflies.

Several public land managers in Marin are more than a year into a project meant to bolster monarch butterfly habitat. The work includes studying the tree groves in Bolinas, Stinson Beach, Muir Beach and Fort Baker, where monarch butterflies bunch together and rest during the colder winter months. An inventory of the county's wild milkweed plants is also being completed in order to find the best locations for more planting.

Mia Monroe, a Marin liaison for the National Park Service, said residents have also been playing their part by planting more nectar and milkweed plants. She and other surveyors have reported seeing a large amount of monarch breeding this spring and summer.

"People are planting the right milkweed in their backyards and nectar plants," Monroe said. "It's restoring that habitat for monarchs and they're finding it. Whether they'll migrate to the coast and make it through the winter, we'll have to wait and see."

In the past five years, Untermann said he has also been seeing more customers looking to make their gardens more monarch-friendly. Ann Brenner of Ross



Residents who have tropical milkweed are not required to rip out their plants under the ban but are being encouraged to cut the plant down to about 6 inches during the fall and winter months. The county is also encouraging residents to contact the [University of California Marin Master Gardener Help Desk](#) at 415-473-4910 or via email at [HelpDesk@marinmg.org](mailto:HelpDesk@marinmg.org).

A milkweed identification guide can be found at [monarchparasites.org/milkweed-identification](http://monarchparasites.org/milkweed-identification).

---

Tags: [Butterflies](#), [environment](#), [garden](#), [monarch butterflies](#), [Native plants](#), [newsletter](#), [Outdoors](#), [Wildlife](#)



## Will Houston

Will Houston covers environment, transportation, West Marin and the city of Novato for the Marin IJ. He covered environment, cannabis and county government for the Eureka Times-Standard and was a contributor to the Monterey Herald. He graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in biology from San Diego State University. Reach the author at [whouston@marinij.com](mailto:whouston@marinij.com) or follow Will on Twitter: [@Will\\_S\\_Houston](#)

[whouston@marinij.com](mailto:whouston@marinij.com)

[Follow Will Houston @Will\\_S\\_Houston](#)

## Join the Conversation

We invite you to use our commenting platform to engage in insightful conversations about issues in our community. We reserve the right at all times to remove any information or materials that are unlawful, threatening, abusive, libelous, defamatory, obscene, vulgar, pornographic, profane, indecent or otherwise objectionable to us, and to disclose any information necessary to satisfy the law, regulation, or government request. We might permanently block any user who abuses these conditions.



## Pleasant Hill: Startup Is Changing the Way People Retire

This Princeton grad's startup raised \$110 million to help you plan a comfortable retirement. See how its free tool can get you on track.

SmartAsset | Sponsored

## Help UNICEF Reach the World's Most Vulnerable Kids

Donate now to help UNICEF ensure every child is safe and protected.

UNICEF USA | Sponsored

## Amazon Left Scrambling As Shoppers Find Out About Secret Deals

Online Shopping Tools | Sponsored

## Pay No Interest Until 2024 With These Credit Cards

NerdWallet | Sponsored

Sign Up

## 7 Mistakes You'll Make Hiring a Financial Advisor

Hiring the wrong financial advisor can wreak havoc on your investments and ruin your retirement. This new tool can help.

SmartAsset | Sponsored

## Pay 0% Intro Interest Until 2024 With One of These Credit Cards

NerdWallet | Sponsored

Sign Up

## A Soldier Showed Me This Laundry Trick

EarthBreeze | Sponsored

## Unsold Alaska Cruise Cabins Are Almost Being Given Away: See Prices

Alaska Cruise Deals | sponsored searches | Sponsored

## Empty Caribbean Cruise Cabins Cost Almost Nothing

Cruise Deals | Sponsored searches | Sponsored

## Samsung's new foldable will change how you work

The latest generation of foldables take on-the-go office productivity to the next level.

Galaxy For Business | Sponsored

Read More

## Top Scientists: If Anyone Have Tinnitus (Ear Ringing) Do This Immediately

Healthbay | Sponsored

## Homeowners Are Trading in Their Doorbell Cams for This.

Keilini | Sponsored

## Top Heart Surgeon: This Simple Trick Helps Empty Your Bowels Every Morning

Gundry MD Bio Complete 3 Supplement | Sponsored





## Thank You, Kaiser Permanente Employees. You Mean the World to Our Members. [↗](#)

By Kaiser Permanente



The personal connections and innovative ideas of our employees are what make us stronger.

---

