



Mothering Monarchs at The Mather

The Mather residents Joan and Tom Soper foster monarchs to help improve survival rates of the species. Once their fostered butterflies are ready, the Sopers release them into The Mather's milkweed patch.

If you've noticed more monarch butterflies fluttering around Evanston this summer, it's thanks to the efforts of nature-loving locals like Joan and Tom Soper.

The Sopers are residents of The Mather, a Life Plan Community for those 62 and better at 425 Davis Street, where they've spearheaded efforts to help monarchs flourish in their neighborhood.

Monarchs need milkweed to survive; the butterflies lay their eggs on the plant's leaves, which are the only food of monarch caterpillars. As milkweed has disappeared throughout the US, the monarch population has plummeted over the past 20 years. Communities and individuals like the Sopers have started growing milkweed in order to reverse this trend. "Butterflies are pollinators—we need them!" Joan points out.

A former neighbor gave the Sopers three milkweed plants, which they planted in the northeast corner of The

Mather's two-acre garden. Today, those plants have multiplied to at least 30, providing a handy "nursery" habitat for the butterflies.

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The Mather is an all-inclusive community for those 62 and better, with spacious apartment homes, resort-like amenities, financial security, and on-site health care if ever needed.

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Five years ago, Joan and Tom stepped up their efforts to help the beleaguered butterflies; they began "fostering" monarchs to help improve survival rates. (Bringing monarchs indoors ensures they'll survive parasites and other perils.)

Throughout each summer, the Sopers search milkweed leaves for tiny monarch eggs and bring those leaves inside to their kitchen-counter monarch station. The station is set up for the different stages of monarch development, from eggs to caterpillars to chrysalis and, finally, butterflies, all of which takes about a month. Joan and Tom keep a constant stream of monarchs moving through their station; as each butterfly is "born," they release it back into the milkweed patch.

There are four other residents of The Mather participating in this effort. "Our group has released 67 butterflies as of August 3," says Joan. "We've already exceeded last year. And the year before that, we only released 17—so our numbers are way up. Hopefully, that's because everyone's conservation efforts are paying off."