

Jack Cook Saving the Monarch Butterfly, One Milkweed Plant at a Time



by **John H. Vargo, Publisher**

If you're walking along the beautiful Peekskill Walkway that overlooks the legendary Hudson River, as hundreds do every day, you may have seen an odd fellow pushing a walker loaded with gallons of water, or sitting on its seat as any normal person in need of a rest might do. Well, that's Peekskill resident Jack Cook but make no mistake, he's no normal person, not your average guy. That's because Jack, along with Bob Walters (retired director of the Science Barge in Yonkers, New York), has made it his mission in life to save the existing milkweed plants growing amongst the shrubbery along the popular Hudson River walkway. The question then is "why?"

Well, Jack's enthusiasm for saving existing milkweed plants along the Hudson is based on a strong desire to save the Monarch Butterfly that needs the plant to lay its eggs and, thereby, secure the promise of the next generation. The kind gesture was inspired by the February/March issue of "Boating on the Hudson" magazine that outlined the plight of the monarch and what must be done to save it from extinction. The reduction in its numbers, seen every year as they migrate over the longest distance of any other migration of bird or insect, is dramatic indeed - from billions of them 50 years ago to only thousands today. Fortunately, there are hundreds of organizations across the U.S. all trying to save the glorious monarch from such a fate.



While there are many factors that contribute to this loss, from such practices as weed-whacking, poisoning or just being uninformed of the importance of the plant's existence, the Monarch's threatened life cycle is something that can be reversed through education and publicity.

And that's where Jack Cook comes in. After Jack read the aforementioned "Boating on the Hudson" issue, he contacted me with various concerns about the state of the Peekskill Walkway and what might be done to rectify the situation in terms of insuring one of America's most beautiful flowering plants and protecting the existence of this most royal butterfly. In turn, I contacted Bob Walters who volunteered to meet with Jack, stroll along the riverfront and discuss what opportunities might exist to save the plant and butterfly. To their surprise, they discovered dozens of milkweed plants living in various locations along the two-mile walkway. Suddenly, and most dramatically, saving existing milkweed could save enormous time, money and effort in getting the plant properly recognized and established along the popular walkway.

What neither Jack nor Bob considered, however, was the complete unfamiliarity of what this plant meant to the maintenance crews.

For instance, milkweed begins its own life cycle by distributing its seeds each fall from a seed pod that opens and allows the wind to blow its content in various directions. Once it is interspersed, it grows a tubular root system that is tough and resilient to just about any abuse - except chemicals and weed-whacking. As he watered and staked the locations of the existing milkweed plants, the maintenance clean-up crews, unfortunately, weed-whacked most of the plants down to ground level. While this makes for a beautiful, clean, landscaped walkway, it does nothing for the monarch butterfly and its survival. So, eradicating these horrible practices along the walkway suddenly became Jack Cook's battle cry!

That said, with his own money, both Jack and Bob created a map of the existing milkweed along the riverfront and both are now promoting the Pollinated Pathway concept to any that will listen - especially the maintenance crews. "Let's get it done," is Jack's command and we're right along with him.



Peekskill Walkway - four foot high milkweed plants, a great example of what can be done with very little time and effort and money on everyone's part.