

In September 2008, I snapped a photo of a scruffy little fledgling mockingbird in a downtown Tulsa parking lot. I wasn't sure what it was, and finding out gave rise to a regular feature on the Tulsa World Outdoors page called "The World Around You: A closer look at something you might see every day." Twelve years later, every day this September, I've seen a 12-foot high glowing yellow wall of Maximillian sunflowers across my backyard courtesy of the eastern region Okies for Monarchs wildflower seed mix from the Johnston Seed Company of Enid. That's worth a World Around You themed column "even if the fishing is great right now and archery seasons open in less than two weeks. This stuff is important for rural wild areas as well as urban ones. Nationally, and locally, the drive to help the monarch butterfly has created a boom in that species that is noticeable locally now and will be through this month as we approach the fall migration time in October. But what typically gets only a side mention in monarch-centered news is the importance of the wide variety of native pollinators we rely upon to keep our food supplies and wild lands healthy and the need for native plants to help keep things in balance. We all know that fewer forbs, or wildflowers, and fewer pollinators can mean fewer game birds, deer and less-productive agriculture, too. Along with that wall of flowers in my backyard came a constant buzz, and I was surprised to learn I didn't recognize the source of much of it. You know, stuff I saw every day but failed to take a closer look. I learned about bee flies and fairy bees this week. Yes, those are real things. The first order of business, though, was bringing the buzz to my backyard. And that started in September last year. The Okies for Monarchs Mix of native wildflowers was developed two years ago as a "phase two" in creating seed mixes at Johnston Seed in a cooperative effort with the Oklahoma Monarch and Pollinator Cooperative (Okies for Monarchs for short). Katie Hawk, spokeswoman for The Nature Conservancy Oklahoma and Okies for

Monarchs, said bringing native plants back to the landscape was one of the group's first recognized challenges years ago. "One of the reasons identified as why there was not more habitat for pollinators is that there was a lack of availability of native wildflower seeds to plant," she said. Public interest in the Oklahoma-grown wildflower seed mixes developed in cooperation with Johnston exploded, Hawk said. "People are doing entire fields," said Sarah McLaughlin, native and conservation sales representative at Johnston. "When you have landscapers starting to request 50-pound bags, you know it's something people are interested in." I prepped last year by wiping out a 4-foot wide, 50-foot long swath of Bermuda grass and boxwood hedge. I also prepped an 8-by-20 foot flower bed in an area prone to erosion that also surrounded utility boxes I was tired of mowing around. Autumn was so mild last year I waited until mid winter to lay out the seed mix. I left the flowerbed area until spring thinking I would buy starts for a more guaranteed result there. Then friends posted on Facebook they had "extras" and I jumped on those. They gave me a treasure trove of tropical and oscar milkweeds, bee balm, Mexican sunflower, passion vine and some canna lilies to create a mostly non-native, but productive, nectar and milkweed source. The flower bed drew a wide variety of butterflies, as well as ruby throated hummingbirds that loved the cannas, and the milkweed grew a few dozen monarch caterpillars "some that I brought into a backyard enclosure and more that I left to their own survival instincts. To be honest about the wildflower plot, about half the time I didn't know if I was growing flowers or just a bunch of "weeds." As blooms emerged I learned what I had. The earlier flowers "now going to seed or serving as an active under story in the shade of the Maximillians" were common annual sunflower, partridge pea, prairie coreopsis, lemon mint, bur marigold, Pennsylvania smartweed, white prairie clover and Indian blanket. "Volunteers" that popped up from the existing seed bank, apparently activated by removal of the hedge and Bermuda, included black nightshade,

devilâ€™s trumpet, wild celery and some bright red tropical sage. The late-blooming Maximillians were a first for me. Most of the summer I assumed I was going to have goldenrod hedge. In mid-August when the plants shot up from waist high to well over head high I was scratching my head. My wife called it â€œthe big green privacy fence.â€• McLaughlin clued me in. â€œJust wait until about the second week of September and it will be covered with flowers and the pollinators will love it,â€• she said. McLaughlin also shared a Maximillian trick. Cut off the tops when they are only 3 or 4 feet tall they will bush out more than growing so tall, she said. Good tip. The monarchs, the swallowtails, the painted ladies and big butterflies all came as expected. The surprises were the sweat bees that are part of a group of more than 1,000 species, the leaf cutter bees that are part of 63 different species, and the hundreds of little tiny fairy bees I didnâ€™t know existed. The smaller butterflies, the skippers and sachems and hairstreaks and blues, came in droves. There are dozens of species, and they are tricky to identify. Next year maybe the Maximillians will be back again, but itâ€™s quite possible other wildflowers will dominate. With wildflowers the germination just depends on the weather and seeds planted two or three years before might suddenly explode, McLaughlin said. Whatever pops up, it is sure to reveal some more everyday things that deserve a closer look. Kelly Bostian 918-581-8357 kelly.bostian@tulsaworld.com Twitter: @KellyBostian