

Planting milkweed to help monarchs around the Tulsa area has created a hot spot for the suffering national population, but one side effect is people aren't quite sure how to react to their success. Barbara Kunze was one of many this week that put out calls for caterpillar help. She called the Tulsa World and others are posting on Facebook pages. She planted three big common milkweed plants near her home this spring and was happy to see about a dozen caterpillars on there early this week. "But we went out there today and there were gobs!" she said. "We counted 48, but now there are so many more tiny ones, just thread-sized, there are probably around 60 on that one plant, from about 2 inches long to a tiny thread ... There isn't much left of that plant and I just don't want them to all end up dying for lack of food."

She asked to put out the word if anyone might have a place to take the caterpillars or who might have a supply of milkweed to bring for them. She was connected with a landowner who has a meadow with lots of wild milkweed growing across the acreage. Other options might have been buying more plants from local greenhouses, finding wild-growing honey vine in local neighborhoods to take them to, finding someone else with a yard full of milkweed via Facebook "a rare commodity because everyone seems to be loaded up this year" or to just let nature take its course. Experts say three things likely are at play with the caterpillar invasion. "There is a good information campaign in Tulsa, there was also a good push with the mid-summer monarch migration, and you have enough people that are planting (milkweeds) now that you're maintaining a good little local population that builds up through the summer," said Chip Taylor, University of Kansas entomologist and founder of Monarch Watch. The better-known and bigger annual migration of monarchs is not expected in this area until late September, he said. That will be about the time all the caterpillars that are around now will turn into butterflies and join others on

the way south to Mexico. "The leading edge of the migration is around Ames, Iowa, this week," he said. Local Monarch Watch conservation specialist Sandra Schwinn knows well the plight of the backyard monarch watcher. She first planted milkweeds in her garden 40 years ago and has watched caterpillars and monarchs every year since. "It's true. If you plant, it they will come," she said. The message is it's nice to try to save some in later stages by putting them in an outdoor enclosure where they can pupate and fly off with less threat from predators, but it's really OK to let nature take its course, too, she said. "People do see them and it's hard not to want to save them all," she said.

She cautioned that monarchs are long-distance migrators and are best exposed to natural daylight cycles and weather as they grow rather than inside under artificial light. "On your porch is a fine place to put them if you want them in a screened enclosure," she said. Taylor said the monarch, like most insects, produces a lot of eggs as a survival strategy. "Generally only 2 to 3% will survive to become adults," he said. Flies that parasitize the critters and their chrysalis, and ants and wasps that eat the eggs, are all threats. Scissor-tailed flycatchers, Oklahoma's state bird, are champions at picking off "soft" monarchs after they first emerge with new wings, he said. "Once they are hardened and adult they do pretty well at avoiding trouble," he said. Schwinn offered a few tips to help people help caterpillars survive naturally. Plant plenty of milkweeds, and plant varieties that will be present in spring and in fall. Spread it out because clumps of milkweed have lots of caterpillars and attract lots of predators. Clip off the milkweed flowers. The flowers have nectar that attracts predators and the caterpillars become a bonus for them. It's good that people are noticing the monarchs and seeing more of them, she said. "Whether there are more around or just more people are noticing them? Good question. I have no idea on that," she said. "But we are watching and learning more all

the time and thatâ€™s a good thing.â€• FEATURED VIDEO Kelly Bostian 918-581-8357 <&rdpEm>kelly.bostian@t
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