

THE MILKWEED PIONEER

A Native Plant Project

BY AMY SAND | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ARIEL FRIED

WALTER & SUZANNE SCOTT PAVILION



Kyle Johnson, a self-described “plant nerd” has the dedication and patience to grow native plants from seed, which requires refrigeration and the mimicking of seasonal dormancy, a process known as embryonic dormancy.

Can compost change an entire organization’s operations? Ask Kyle Johnson, the land maintenance technician and one-man crew at the Joslyn Art Museum. After two years on the job, Kyle felt confident in his regular duties and began to look for more efficient ways to care for the art museum’s grounds. During a fall 2012 cleanup, he had an “aha” moment when he realized he was throwing away landscape waste, only to buy compost later on. This realization set Kyle down a new path of discovery: Was there a cheaper, more efficient, all-around better way to fertilize? It turns out there was.

Kyle learned about compost and then began putting his knowledge to use; incorporating it into the grounds maintenance procedures. This new method of using homemade compost was not only cost effective, but also further enriched the soil with much-needed nutrients. The improved soil structure inspired Kyle to seek out other natural ways to maintain the Joslyn grounds. With a beautiful foundation laid, it only made sense to take more action toward a more organic landscape, thus the native plant project was born.

“People kind of forget about the native [plants] we have here that grow really well, which the wildlife appreciates and sometimes needs

very desperately,” says Kyle. One of those organisms in need is the monarch butterfly. For its entire life cycle—from the beginning egg stage as a caterpillar to getting its wings as a butterfly—the monarch is dependent upon the milkweed.

While trying to locate native plants, Kyle, a self-described “plant nerd,” quickly realized he was going to have to grow the plants starting with only a seed. “I ran into a lot of unavailability because people don’t grow them in their yards, and garden centers don’t sell them. I could only get seed for them,” he says. Some seeds were fairly easy to locate, using well-known sources in the horticulture community like Prairie Moon Nursery and Prairie Frontier. For others, he consulted experts in the field such as the Nebraska Statewide Arboretum and even ventured into the wild to hand-harvest a few.

The issue of locating seeds hasn’t been the only hurdle to overcome. During the winter, Kyle’s “mad lab” is housed in the basement of the Joslyn, amid construction and low-hanging pipes. Two side-by-side tables made from recycled materials are jam-packed with milkweeds and native plants like fuzzy-tongue penstemon and blue flag iris. The issue of physical space isn’t the only challenge with winter gardening.

Some plants require refrigeration and the mimicking of seasonal dormancy, a process known as embryonic dormancy. It's clear that growing natives from seed takes the dedication and patience of someone who is fueled by love for nature.

Through his exploration with native plants, Kyle discovered there are 22 native species of milkweed to Nebraska and Iowa. "That seemed like a number that I could find a spot for, and it would be really cool to have a complete collection of something ... which would be unique to the Joslyn." After one season, Kyle has been able to locate 17 species: three Iowan and 14 Nebraskan natives. Not to be confused with milk thistles, the common milkweed is a perennial wildflower with a purple spherical blossom, shaped like that of a dandelion that has gone to seed. It can be found growing in the wild along the edges of fields, the tall stalks blowing in the wind.

Milkweeds at first may have seemed like a simple gut decision: Growing up on a farm in Tekamah, Nebraska, Kyle used to break open milkweed pods and watch the seeds fly away in the fall wind. But milkweeds are more than just a reminder of Kyle's childhood; they are tough, beautiful plants that can withstand the difficult prairie climate including drought. This makes them excellent candidates for a rain garden, which is the project he plans to pursue after completing the native plants collection. For the rain garden, he proposes to elevate the storm drains in the current parking islands, creating intentional low spots to collect the water runoff. The basins would then be filled with milkweeds and other native plants to not only retain the water but also filter out pollutants, such as oil, before returning it to the sewer system.

Kyle plans to showcase the entire milkweed collection this summer in the Discovery Garden, located at the northwest corner of the Joslyn property. He hopes that it will be both a novel attraction and an opportunity for learning. He wants visitors to appreciate native plants equally for their beauty and function, and to inspire people to begin their own native plant gardens. Thanks to Kyle's research, it now only requires a little dedication and love.



The basement of the Joslyn Art Museum houses Kyle Johnson's "mad lab" where two side-by-side tables made from recycled materials are jam-packed with milkweeds and native plants like fuzzy-tongue penstemon and blue flag iris—which he starts from seed.

You can purchase seeds of milkweeds and other Omaha native plant seeds at United Seeds (UnitedSeedsOnline.com), Stock Seed Farms in Murdock, Nebraska (StockSeed.com), and The Fragrant Path in Fort Calhoun, Nebraska (FragrantPathSeeds.com). For more information on growing milkweeds, reach out to Kyle directly at kjohnson@joslyn.org.

VISIT AND GROW

The Joslyn Art Museum is free and open to the public Monday through Sunday 10am to 4pm and Thursday until 8pm. More information is available at Joslyn.org.

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