

PLANTING A BUTTERFLY GARDEN WITH FORMER FIRST LADY

By Chris Puttock, Rotary Club of College Park, Maryland [Published in the *Rotarian Magazine*, January 2020]



[Above] Smithsonian Research Associate Christopher Puttock met with the First Lady of the United States Michelle Obama and several dozen Congressional spouses and students to plant a native butterfly garden at the Marie H. Reed Community Learning Center on April 29, 2010. The Monarch Biodiversity Garden was designed by Puttock, who is also Executive Director of Chesapeake Natives, Inc., Chief Botanist for the Natural Partners Monarch Sister Schools Program, and leader of the Rotary District 7620 Environmental Conservation Committee.

[Below] Joe Richardson developed a program at Urbana High School to keep “Lunch Out of Landfills” that has rapidly expanded to other schools around Frederick County. He was featured in the January 2020 *Rotarian Magazine*.



In April 2010, I got a call from some office within the White House. The congressional spouses wanted to put in a garden with Michelle Obama at the Marie Reed Elementary School in Washington, D.C. With about 13 days’ notice, they said, “Can we get this garden together and put it in?” I said, “Tall job, but we’ll do it.”

I’m a botanist by training. I did my degrees in Sydney, Australia, and I was the collections manager of

botany at the Bishop Museum in Hawaii before I came to the Smithsonian Institution, where I am a research associate. I’m also the chair of the Environmental Sustainability Rotarian Action Group. Around 2009, I met a Rotarian named William Dent at the Rotary Club of Washington. He is the executive director of Natural Partners, which works with the Monarch Sister Schools Program. He was looking for somebody who could design gardens and put them into schools.

Thirteen days is a short time to get all the plants together, plan a garden, prepare the beds. But we were able to do it. I laid out the pattern of where the plants would go in the garden. Then the truck with 600 or 700 plants arrived, and we had them all set out, along with the tools, gloves, and all the things that the kids would need.

It was afternoon when Michelle Obama arrived with the group of congressional spouses. They put on gloves; some of them would do planting. Some of them were doing watering. At one point, Michelle was working with

me in a corner of the garden. Several children were helping us, so we talked about how to dig the hole where the plant was going to go, how to take a plant out of its pot, and how to water it.

She knew about gardening. She had been working with the gardeners at the White House and was growing vegetables there. In the garden I had designed, most of it was native plants, but there was a section that was, basically, plants for pizza: peppers, tomatoes, and basil. We spoke about vegetable gardens versus butterfly gardens, which provide food for the caterpillars and nectar for the butterflies.

The garden was about 750 square feet, and we planted about 30 species of plants native to Washington: plantain-leaved pussytoes, common milkweed, purplehead sneezeweed. If you want to attract butterflies, you have to have plants that provide nectar. They like plants that will give them a little tube with a drop of sugar. Butterflies and moths have specific groups of species that they will lay their eggs on. The monarch will lay them only on milkweeds. But so much of their habitat has been lost that the monarch population is at less than 10 percent of what it was 50 years ago. Some years it could be as low as 1 percent of historic levels.

Michelle was a lovely lady to work with. She also helped paint a mural on the wall next to the garden that featured butterflies and plants, and then she signed her name. After about an hour and a half, she left with the group of spouses.

Butterfly gardens in inner-city schools can bring nature home to the kids. Butterflies are an easy way to teach kids about the needs of specific creatures. The charismatic monarch is a fantastic ambassador for the classroom. The Monarch Sister Schools Program is now more than 10 years old and has installed many gardens; when I was associated with it, we installed about 30 gardens in three years. Several Rotary clubs are still engaged in the school programs.