

# Texas Ranch Produces Monarch Butterflies

Native Texans Barbara Dorf and her husband, Tracy Villareal, own a 24-acre tract near Corpus Christi. It's one of the few operations in the country that produces Monarch butterflies commercially. It's a sideline business because Dorf and Villareal are oceanographers by day.

Says Dorf, "We specialize in producing the biggest, best and healthiest Texas-sized Monarch butterflies you'll see anywhere." The colorful insects are released at weddings, funerals, parties, and other special occasions. They also provide butterflies for research, education and exhibits.

Villareal says some producers will harvest wild milkweed to feed their caterpillars, while others might raise milkweed and complete the whole cycle in a giant greenhouse.

Big Tree Butterflies is a seasonal operation that begins production in the early spring when the Monarch migration moves from Mexico into South Texas. Dorf and Villareal capture male and female Monarchs, test them to make sure they're disease free, then put them in a building to mate and lay eggs. Dorf and Villareal raise their own milkweed (caterpillar food) in a shade house using 72 cell flats for seedlings. After eggs are produced they put eggs and caterpillars on the seedlings.

Their plant production house is 28 by 48 ft. with a 15-ft. peak. It's covered with shade cloth or plastic and has fans for air circulation. Plants are raised on metal benches. If the plants or Monarchs were raised on dirt, ants would pose problems.

Monarch eggs go through their life cycle in a 12 by 20-ft. metal building with day length, humidity and temperature control. They have 2 by 2 by 4-ft. mesh cubes with plants and caterpillars that produce mature Monarchs in about 4 weeks. Butterflies are produced from March through October. In the past year Big Tree was able to raise about 1,500 of the gorgeous Monarchs.

"Raising Monarchs in higher concentration than in nature requires careful management," says Villareal. "We have to check them each day, clean and sanitize the facilities and keep parasites and bacteria away. Still, it's a labor of love that we really enjoy."

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Big Tree Butterflies, 332 North Palmetto Street, Rockport, Texas 78382 (ph 361 779-3145; www.bigtreebutterflies.com).



These monarchs are being force-fed nectar prior to shipping.

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