

Chamisa and the Monarch Butterfly

I sit at my desk in the sun at La Puerta and watch through my window at what looks to be Monarch butterflies (it could be the North American Viceroy, I suppose, but I don't choose to think so) flitting here and there, landing on the chamisa that is glowing in the sunlight, still beautifully golden--this clump not yet having reached the silvery, going-to-seed stage. It's such a lovely sight, and I saw the same phenomenon yesterday when I stopped to talk with the piñon-wood salesman stationed between a bank of blossoming and gently blowing chamisa and the arched entryway to Ranchos de Placitas. Yes, I did buy wood, as it is getting to be time for nightly fires in the kiva fireplace. It's a treat to watch the fire while cooking, and a cozy and warm atmosphere for eating dinner--celebrating the sunset and the end of another day on the high desert in New Mexico. I usually do something like dig in the garden or stack wood when I am warming up to writing something, so since I am writing something today, I also moved the geraniums, which spend the summer next to the front door, to sunny places inside. Dick and I then had space to stack a week's supply of firewood handy to the fireplace.



So fall is here. The thermometer is dipping below freezing just before dawn. I slipped on just a tiny sliver of ice on the front walk this morning as I headed to my car for the morning trip to Curves. The apricot trees are red-orange and shedding their leaves. A kitty was huddled up there in the leaves this morning, taunting two desperately-agitated Welsh terriers who were leaping around below. The cottonwoods are almost fully in color the entire length of the Rio Grande, a green-gold ribbon. The Monarch butterflies are stocking up on whatever our chamisa has to offer en route to Mexico for the winter. Strange that they would find something edible about *chrysothamnus nauseosus*. But then, milkweed isn't so great, either, and that's where the eggs are laid, on the underside of the leaf, and that is also the caterpillar's food—a poisonous plant for a butterfly that also ends up poisonous to a creature that surely doesn't try ingesting one more than once.

Dick and I have visited a Monarch

sanctuary in Angangueo, Michoacan, where the transvolcanic mountains rise to about 11,000 feet and are home to pine and oyamel fir trees. From Angangueo we rode horseback high up into the mountains until we were literally surrounded by butterflies: great clusters of orange attached to limbs of trees, and overhead (and the air around us) filled with butterflies. It was a magical experience. "Las monarcas" are arriving there now, hundreds of thousands at a time. The cold front in Oklahoma a few weeks ago pushed them along, and as of today, I read that they have appeared in the skies of northern Mexico. There are only twelve mountain tops on the planet where these butterflies feel at home, and there they winter, because it's warmer than in far-north North America where they go through their egg, larva, pupa, to adult stages. While the larva needs milkweed to reach the pupa stage, the adult sips liquids only--goldenrod, thistle, lantana and other plants, like chamisa. As the adults head south, the females lay eggs along the route. It actually takes



three generations of monarchs to reach Angangueo, but once there, no reproductive activity takes place. The adults live five months in Mexico, longer than the generations that precede them and also those that come after. When they head north in March, they have only a few weeks to live, and they have to get to the milkweed to lay their eggs, so the cycle can begin again.

If we are lucky, we humans know four generations during our lifetime. I knew my grandparents, in fact, grew up with one set of them. My parents, of course, my children, and now my grandchildren. We also have great-grandchildren--Dick for real, and for me, inherited. If I am still more lucky, I might know other great-grandchildren. Time goes by so quickly. And it seems like the seasons just rush right by. With the seasons, so does life.

I'm almost the oldest generation now. I think a lot about this as my mother winds down and my father has already passed to whatever he has passed to. Mom talks to him every night. Tonight she may tell him about the Monarch butterflies. I imagine she will. ■



Lucy Noyes, CRS, Associate Broker
lucy@LaPuertaLLC.com
www.lucynoyes.com
La Puerta Real Estate Services, LLC
One Ridge Court, Placitas, New Mexico 87043
505-867-3388 office • 505-280-8352 mobile