

### **Milkweed, Monarchs, and Day Lilies**

In 2015 I was driving by the Pretty Marsh Cemetery (44°20'26.3"N 68°24'02.1"W) near Bartlett's Landing and noticed that the Town of Mount Desert was doing some construction and repair on the site. I've picked up some lovely shrubs and native plants through Town maintenance work in the past because there's rarely enough space in a cemetery for overgrown plants, so I stopped and spoke with the crew. They helped me load two bushel baskets of very large milkweed plants into the back of my car and I transplanted them to the hillside by our painting studio. They have thrived and are host to hundreds of monarchs every year from August through early November. Poor soil and neglect seem to be key to growing a huge patch of milkweed that, in a year with excessive rainfall like 2023, will grow taller than the gardener. I collect the ripe seed pods just as they open and spread them in likely spaces on our lot. Milkweed is a keystone species for monarchs and other insects, bees and hummingbirds are very fond of the flowers, and the caustic white sap makes it a barrier plant to keep deer from overgrazing. I picked a few branches for this painting and then had to fend off the bees that came in with the blossoms while I drew them up.

With milkweed comes monarch butterflies, and the plants are covered with caterpillars in various stages from mid-August through October. As I write this, we're having a hurricane\*, but on a normal sunny September day there will be a few dozen newly hatched Monarchs feeding on the Joe Pye weed, goldenrod, or the pink and white blossoms of the Seven Sons tree. They are slow, clumsy, and vibrant when they're new - good subjects to draw and make color studies. The plants are also host to another native dependent species: the milkweed tussock moth. The plump green caterpillars with spiky tufts of black and white bristles are often destroyed as a pest and competitor of the monarchs, but they are a valuable species in their own right and will likely be featured in a future painting.

The teapot is a lovely example of a "two-cup Brown Betty" made sometime around 1900 by the James Sadler and Son Ltd pottery in Burslem, England. The deep brown glaze is interrupted near the top of the pot by bands of pale aqua and pink that enhance the reflection of light and images from the surrounding objects. It makes just the right amount of tea for two people and I am occasionally put out that it is in use as a painting prop. My Aunt Cynthia used this pot almost every day; it sat on her folding tv table for every episode of "Days Of Our Lives". If I visited her in late afternoon, I was invited to have a cup while we discussed the latest cliffhanger in the plot.

Tiger lilies, *Hemerocallis fulva*, originated in Asia and were widely imported to the US after WWII where they naturalized to the extent that they are now considered an invasive species. My grandmother had a patch in a low spot on her farm property - they are also known as "ditch lilies" for their ability to thrive with wet feet - and I brought a few plants with me when I moved to Maine. They have proved perfectly hardy here, blooming on July 4th and outlasting the deer who like to snack on the flower buds. This year the stalks grew to five feet; the orange blossoms were huge and particularly intensely colored under cloudy skies. I picked a succession of blooms and opening buds for this painting. The buds, in this plant particularly, are very interesting in terms of color and structure. The entire plant is edible and someday I'll experiment to see if the tubers are, as advertised, a perfectly good substitute for potatoes.

The bright red clustered blossom in this composition is the Cardinal Flower, *Lobelia cardinalis*. It is native to the NE US and Canada and is traditionally a medicinal used by the Penobscot. The plant thrives in wet locations, and I have a great deal of bog, so in 2021 I tossed a handful of seeds around a small pool and was rewarded by a great swath of intensely bright red flowers. The hummingbirds loved it. Very few flowers came back in that location this spring, but now I have a dozen plants growing in a much drier location about 50' away. Did the record rains in early spring drown them out of their home in the bog? Unknown, and as long as there are enough blossoms to paint and the hummingbirds can find them, I won't worry about it. We'll see where they show up in spring, 2024.

\*Hurricane Lee which, fortunately, did not do very much damage on Mount Desert Island. Places that were already flooded in the Maritimes were not so lucky.

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