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CANADIAN Geographic



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The next big crop?

Quebec farmers are hoping monarch-saving milkweed can also foster a growing commercial market

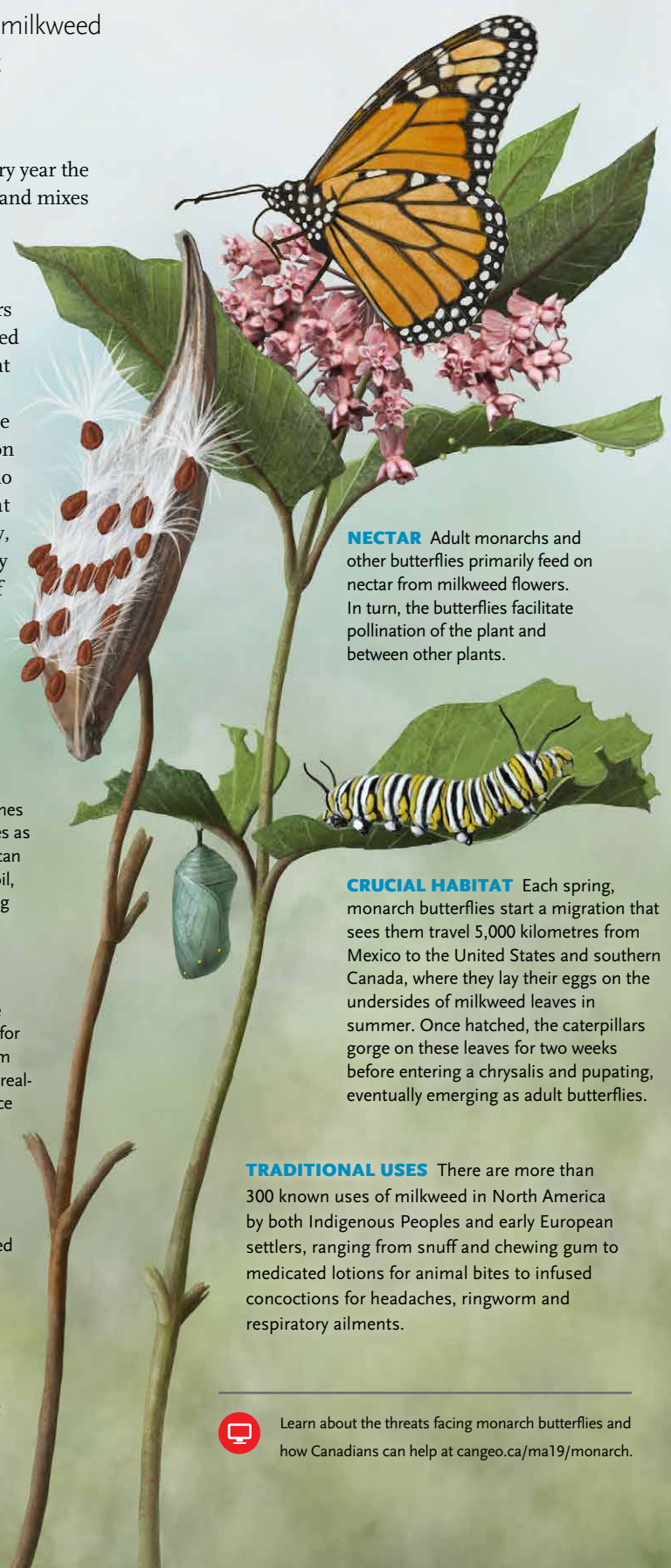
By Mark Cardwell

Nathalie Léonard used to hate common milkweed. Every year the fast-growing and toxic plant invades her berry patches and mixes with the hay she grows for livestock on her farm in Lac-du-Cerf, Que.

But now she's the president of Coopérative Monark, a group of 120 Quebec farmers and five Vermont producers that plants milkweed crops to help save the endangered monarch butterfly (which relies on the plants for habitat and nectar) and make a buck while doing it.

Modern commercial interest is mostly focused on the silky fibres inside the dozen or so seed pods that grow on milkweeds two to three years after planting. Léonard, who harvested her first crop in August 2018, says that although the market for milkweed is still in its infancy, "If and when we figure out how to grow, harvest and dry high-quality product, there will be no shortage of customers wanting to buy it."

Here's a look at the commercial uses of the common milkweed plant.



NECTAR Adult monarchs and other butterflies primarily feed on nectar from milkweed flowers. In turn, the butterflies facilitate pollination of the plant and between other plants.

CRUCIAL HABITAT Each spring, monarch butterflies start a migration that sees them travel 5,000 kilometres from Mexico to the United States and southern Canada, where they lay their eggs on the undersides of milkweed leaves in summer. Once hatched, the caterpillars gorge on these leaves for two weeks before entering a chrysalis and pupating, eventually emerging as adult butterflies.

TRADITIONAL USES There are more than 300 known uses of milkweed in North America by both Indigenous Peoples and early European settlers, ranging from snuff and chewing gum to medicated lotions for animal bites to infused concoctions for headaches, ringworm and respiratory ailments.



OIL SPILLS The silky tufts that carry milkweed seeds on the wind are six times more buoyant than cork and five times as warm as wool. The tube-like strands can also absorb 40 times their weight in oil, and have been used to develop floating booms that sop up oil spills.



DOWN-FREE PARKAS Currently, the biggest demand for milkweed fibres is for their insulating properties. Fibres from Quebec milkweeds are used by Montreal-based company Quartz Co. to produce high-end, down-free parkas that are considered a natural, cruelty-free alternative to feather-down jackets.



FUTURE POTENTIAL Quebec milkweed growers are trying to find new uses and markets for the plant. One potential customer is Monarch Flyway, a company in Ogallala, Neb., that makes products such as a topical pain reliever from the plant's pressed seed oil. Milkweed stalks are also being assessed as a biomass fuel source.



Learn about the threats facing monarch butterflies and how Canadians can help at cangeo.ca/ma19/monarch.