



Westmount resident on  
a mission to save pollinators

## Description

# Penny Arsenault, champion for the environment and friend of endangered Monarchs

By Irwin Rapoport

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**Monarch butterflies, native species of bees**, and many other insects that serve as pollinators are in serious trouble and have made the news in terms of the threats they are facing. And in late June, more than 4,000 milkweed plants were mowed down just as the Monarchs were arriving in Montreal and southern Quebec to lay their eggs for the “super Monarchs” who make the return journey to the highland forests in Mexico, where they spend the winter.



Heleneum and Coneflowers

Monarchs have many champions locally and one of them is Westmount resident **Penny Arsenault**, a most definite friend of the environment and biodiversity in terms of activism at the municipal and provincial levels, and at home, via her garden which contains many species of native flowers and shrubs that provide homes and habitat for native bees, butterflies, various insects, and animals.

“I am with the [Butterflyway Project](#), a **David Suzuki Foundation initiative** to build a corridor across the country to support the Monarch Butterfly on its yearly migration, as well as all pollinators,” she said. “I am learning a lot by starting the plants from seeds and watching them grow. It’s very satisfying, and I’m trying to encourage others to do the same.”

Arsenault also replied to some questions, which Westmount Magazine hopes inspires others to act to protect our environment and biodiversity, which faces many threats due to loss of habitat from development, pollution, and the effects of climate change.

... a world without insects would quickly collapse the food web for birds, amphibians, reptiles and mammals. A serious decline has already happened.

– Penny Arsenault quoting E.O. Wilson from *The Little Things that Run the World*

**WM:** *Why are you concerned about the environment, and how did you become an activist? Why should everyone be concerned and recognize our current situation as an emergency?*

**Arsenault:** I wouldn’t call myself an activist; I would say I’m an outreach volunteer. People should be concerned



because the declining insect population is alarming, accelerating, and the potentially devastating effects of this are not yet that noticeable. In fact, humans are happy with fewer insects around. Unfortunately, as the late Harvard entomologist **E.O. Wilson** wrote in his paper, ***The Little Things that Run the World***, a world without insects would quickly collapse the food web for birds, amphibians, reptiles and mammals. A serious decline has already happened.

If you can remember what your parents' windshield looked like whenever you took a road trip as a kid, it would be covered in squished insects. Gruesome example, I know, but this doesn't happen anymore. You can drive across Canada and still have a clean windshield. On the surface, it seems like a good thing, but think of that food web, and you can see the potential for collapse. Insects feed birds. If you have no insects, the birds have no choice but to die off. Humans are not exempt; insects run the ecosystem that supports us. And they are disappearing.

***WM:** How did you connect with the Butterflyway project, and what role have you played? Why should people from across the island volunteer with local and regional environmental groups?*



MOSD butterfly garden

**Arsenault:** I heard of the project during the first spring of the pandemic, and the timing was right for me to get more involved in environmental concerns. I started out researching the native plants, which support our pollinators, raising 150 seedlings in my living room the first year. They then needed a place to be planted. I spoke to the **MOSD (Montreal Oral School for the Deaf)**, which has garden beds that hadn't been planted for years due to budget, and they agreed to let me start there. We had a planting activity with the students, so the garden there is largely planted by little hands.

I planted a boulevard garden for a friend and contributed time and seedlings to **Westmount Park Church**. This





year I offered free seedlings to anyone in Westmount who wished to add natives to their gardens. I have continued to approach city council to request native pollinator plants in all garden beds and planters. Last spring, I presented the **National Wildlife Federation's Mayor's Pledge for Monarchs** to our Mayor, which was signed last summer. I've been in contact with our horticultural inspector, offering to rally a group of volunteers to build more butterfly gardens and help remove invasive species.

**WM:** *What can municipalities such as Westmount and Montreal do to help bees, butterflies, birds, and mammals survive and thrive? What are they doing right, and what actions should they initiate?*

**Arsenault:** I think awareness is key. With awareness comes the motivation to help. I'd love to see activities at the Westmount library for both adults and kids to educate them about this topic. It would be great to get speakers like entomologist **Doug Tallamy**. He is very knowledgeable with a positive, empowering message to property owners.



Swamp Milkweed

To be honest, Westmount could be doing more. While the planters and garden beds are attractive, a well-thought-out garden should contribute to the environment, not solely to the human eye. Ornamental gardens with introduced species are dead zones for pollinators, and the vast majority of Westmount gardens this year are just that. It's possibly even worse than last year. Other municipalities, like Montreal and Côte Saint- Luc, are listening to the science and doing more and more to support pollinators. On the positive side, we now have a council with many environmentally conscious people on it, so there is hope for next year.

**WM:** *Tell us about your garden and the types of insects, birds, and mammals that it attracts. What can people and municipalities do to create working and effective pollinator gardens?*



**Arsenault:** I grow three types of **Milkweed, Helenium, Echinacea, Asters, Red Columbine, Pearly Everlasting, Anise Hyssop, Pink Turtle Head, Spotted Bee Balm, Brown-eyed Susans** and some **Lupin**. These are all native to our region. Some are not mature, but the bees are very much enjoying the ones that are. I have seen butterflies in the garden too, but so far, alas, no Monarchs. As you may know, the Monarch was placed on the endangered species list recently.

'To be honest, Westmount could be doing more. While the planters and garden beds are attractive, a well-thought-out garden should contribute to the environment, not solely to the human eye.'

– Penny Arsenault

As for what people and municipalities can do, it's pretty simple. Plant any or all the plants listed above, or anything on this excellent [list](#) from **Espace Pour la Vie**.

**WM:** *What attracts you to the plight of the Monarch butterflies, and can you recount some of your recent actions in Westmount to save Monarchs and their habitat, especially milkweed plants?*



Tuberosa Milkweed

**Arsenault:** I feel it would be a great shame to lose this beautiful species but their plight is the plight of all native insects and a barometer for the state of our ecosystem. As far as recent actions, it came to my attention that a large, very mature milkweed garden on private property had been razed. In its ruin were many milkweed plants trying to grow through. I requested the owner's permission to dig up and transplant as many as we could. He kindly



agreed, so on a sweltering day, friends and I dug up 36 milkweeds and transplanted them to another site. I later sent the owner some information and a list of plants I hope he will consider using in his new garden design.

This fall, I will have seeds to give away to those interested and will have seedlings again by spring. Contact me on Facebook at [Everything Westmount](#)

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The City of Westmount, at its September Council meeting, announced that it is officially requesting that the Canadian government protect the Monarch fields and all the 215 hectares north of Trudeau airport as a wilderness and natural area. Boroughs and municipalities on the island are being asked to pass a **resolution** prepared by the [City of Côte Saint-Luc](#) and the **Borough of Saint-Laurent**.

Should the federal government act upon the concerns of many, converting this jewel of a wilderness area into an urban national park, bird and wildlife sanctuary, many Montrealers and environmental activists will be very pleased. The wetlands are home to more than 170 species of birds, many of which visit the wetlands to breed. The area is home to several birds of prey, including Peregrine falcons, the fastest bird in the world and the avian version of the cheetah.

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*Feature image: Penny Arsenault in her garden  
Images: courtesy of Penny Arsenault*

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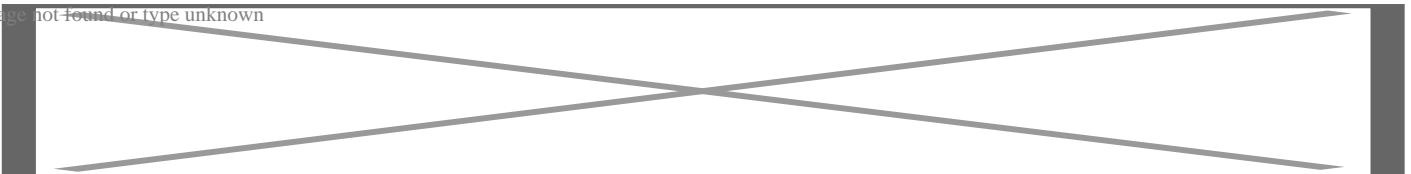
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*Irwin Rapoport is a freelance journalist.*

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1. Environment
2. Westmount

### Tags

1. Irwin Rapoport
2. Monarch butterfly
3. Penny Arsenault
4. pollinator garden

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