

Notable Natives

Milkweed

What would the world be, once bereft,
of wet and wildness? Let them be left.
O let them be left; wildness and wet;
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.
“Inversnaid”

Gerard Manley Hopkins

Milkweed (*Asclepias*) gets a bad rap! One problem is its name. Depending on how one defines “weed,” it isn’t one. It is a herbaceous native plant. The other problem is that *Asclepias syriaca*, common milkweed, pops up in old fields, vacant lots, and fallow farm fields which apparently decreases its value to some folks. It is tough; the other milkweed species, excepting perhaps whorled milkweed, are more conservative. Nevertheless even common milkweed is becoming more scarce and needs protection.

A “weed” is usually a herbaceous plant not considered valuable or beautiful, growing wild and rank, and hindering growth of more acceptable vegetation. This definition does not apply to the *Asclepias* species, three of which this article addresses.

The generic name *Asclepias* comes from the name of the Greek god of healing and medicine, and the plant is sometimes used for its medicinal value. However, common milkweed can be toxic; consuming it may lead to stomach, intestinal, and breathing difficulties. Nonetheless, most milkweed species are excellent for home landscaping.

One of the features that makes *A. syriaca*, common milkweed, a great plant for yards is its deep, fibrous taproot and horizontal white rhizomes. Its extensive root system helps prevent soil erosion and enables the plant to withstand very dry conditions.

Most people have blown the fluffy seeds of *A. syriaca* from the pod in the fall. The plant has a beautiful and fragrant blossom, globular clusters of pink to rose flowers that exude sweetness. The fragrance attracts insects to pollinate the flowers, but because they are so difficult to pollinate, as are all milkweeds, the plants bear only a few fruit pods. Its bright flowers may also attract hummingbirds.

Common milkweed is a major host plant for the monarch butterfly, a species that cannot reproduce without milkweed for its larvae. Caterpillars feed on the leaves and benefit from the toxins which protect them from predation. Their bright stripes warn off the birds! The milky sap from both stem and leaves is also familiar. Children love to break a leaf and watch the sap flow, but they should be cautious as it can burn sensitive skin. Even if this plant were ugly, but it’s not, one should plant it to foster the next generations of monarchs.



Purple milkweed. Photo by Meredith Tucker.

Its gray-green, warty fruit pods are well-loved by flower arrangers and children. The seeds attract not only fluff-blowers but also goldfinches which use the tufts of silky hairs to line their nests. Goldfinches are the latest-nesting local birds because they wait for the milkweed pods to mature and release their down. Other birds using common milkweed include orioles which strip dead stems and use the strips in their nests.

A favorite milkweed species loved by gardeners is *A. tuberosa*, butterfly weed. The species epithet refers to its deep, branching, tuberous taproot. This taproot enables the plant to withstand long, dry periods. If ever a plant could dispute its weedy name, this one can. It is attractive to butterflies but is definitely not a weed! This gorgeous plant is only about thirty inches tall and is the only milkweed that does not exude milky latex. Its sap is clear and watery.

One will never mistake butterfly weed’s flowers. They are arranged in flat-topped clusters at the top of the stem, and each flower is very bright orange, sometimes ranging from



Tiger swallowtail on butterfly weed. Photo by Meredith Tucker.

bright red to pale yellow. It is the showiest of the milkweeds but is not fragrant.

Its fruit consists of long, erect, slender seedpods pointed at both ends and filled with numerous, tightly packed seeds. Each seed is attached to a tuft of long, white, silky hairs which act like parachutes and allow seeds to be windborne like other milkweed seeds.

The flowers are insect-pollinated, and they attract many species of butterfly, especially monarchs. They also attract members of the swallowtail, sulphur, and the copper and hairstreak families. Few of the flowers are successfully pollinated, explaining the small number of seedpods per plant. However, if one loves butterflies, one should grow butterfly weed.

A third milkweed species of interest to home gardeners is *A. incarnata*, called swamp red, or marsh milkweed. Its common names indicate that it is a water-loving plant, and in the wild it is found in wet areas. However, it does well in gardens with average soil moisture. Like butterfly weed, it is very well-behaved under cultivation.



Marsh milkweed. Photo by Meredith Tucker.

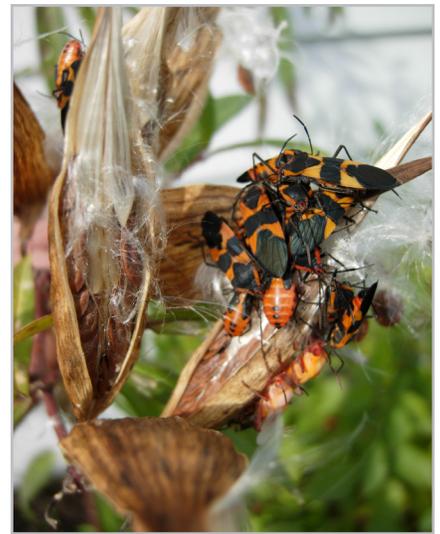
Marsh milkweed is about as tall as common milkweed, and it has milky sap like most others in this genus. Its flowers are arranged in small, loose clusters, each cluster deep or dull

pink, thus its species epithet of *incarnata* meaning “flesh-colored.” The flowers have white centers and a mild fragrance.

Marsh milkweed has a deep taproot and rhizomes about one inch thick with many rootlets. Its fruit consists of thin, tapered pods. These contain the seeds that are attached to tufts of silk, seeds which can disperse in both wind and water.

Marsh milkweed is especially important for supporting wildlife. It attracts and acts as the favorite host for monarch butterflies; other species such as swallowtail butterflies and hummingbird moths help to pollinate it. Bumblebees and honeybees also pollinate marsh milkweed.

Yellow milkweed aphids often attack its stems, but the aphids attract insect predators that eat them such as lady bugs. (The food web is beautifully illustrated by this milkweed.) Additionally, large and small milkweed beetles and milkweed bugs feed and grow on marsh milkweed as well as on other species. All of these beetles and bugs are black and red and flashy, no doubt advertising their unsavory flavor.



Milkweed bugs on marsh milkweed in fall. Photo by Meredith Tucker.

Milkweed beetle larvae bore into milkweed stems and roots to feed. They overwinter as larvae in the roots and emerge in early summer as adults. Milkweed bugs, on the other hand, eat milkweed seeds and are found piercing the pod walls to feed. From our region they actually migrate south to over-winter. These are interesting creatures often appearing on the plant together as nymphs and adults. They are great to watch.

Finally, the stems of marsh milkweed contain threadlike fibers that yellow warblers and orioles use in building their nests. In the wild, mallard ducks and northern pintails eat the seeds while muskrats eat the plant's rhizomes.

Other native milkweeds include *A. viridiflora*, short green milkweed, and the most beautiful of all, *A. purpurascens*, purple milkweed. You can see many of them blooming at CFC's restorations.

When adding plants to your landscape, please use some of these milkweed species. Their service to the monarch butterflies is well established, but beyond that, these plants are important to our local ecosystems and food webs. Help the bugs and birds and other critters. Plant a weed!

— Meredith Tucker

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