



Minnesota Milkweeds for Monarchs

“Every Monarch’s story begins on Milkweed”

– Dr. Karen Oberhauser, University of Minnesota Monarch Lab

Milkweeds are the required host plants for Monarch butterflies. This means that adult females lay their eggs exclusively on milkweed plants, and the resulting caterpillars feed only on milkweed leaves. In recent years there have been drastic declines in both the Monarch population and the prevalence of milkweed plants. For Monarchs to survive, there must be an adequate supply of milkweeds.

In addition to being the only food source for Monarch caterpillars, milkweeds are a nectar source for a wide range of insects, including Monarchs and other butterflies, bees, hummingbirds and other pollinators. And these six species of milkweeds native to Minnesota offer a good choice for every landscape situation except deep shade. All good reasons to plant Minnesota native milkweeds!

Common Milkweed *Asclepias syriaca*

True to its name, this is the most common milkweed in Minnesota. It is the workhorse for the Monarch population, providing an abundance of foliage and nectar. Common Milkweed is tough! It will grow in most soils, including those that are rocky, dry, sandy or heavy clays. Plants spread vigorously from deep, rhizomatous root systems (underground, horizontal root-like stems). Common Milkweed blooms around mid-summer on stems that typically reach 3 to 4 feet. The large round clusters hang loosely downward from leaf axils on the upper portion of the plant. They range from light to deep dusty pink, are delightfully fragrant and provide nectar for a vast array of insects.

There are lots of options for incorporating Common Milkweed in the landscape, although its aggressive growth with more coarse features may not be desirable in small, mixed gardens. It will grow with considerable competition and willingly share with grasses and other vigorous natives such as asters and coneflowers, making it an excellent choice for naturalizing or less structured butterfly and pollinator gardens. It is not necessary to carve out a garden spot for them. They can be planted on the edges of woodlots, in waste places, and in unused patches of ground such as along garages and in alleys. Plant some for the Monarchs!



Butterfly Weed *Asclepias tuberosa*

Butterfly Weed is arguably the showiest of the species and an excellent garden choice. It blooms mid summer with brilliant orange flowers that attract a wide range of pollinators. It does not spread by rhizomes, making it a good choice for smaller spaces or where more strict control is wanted. Butterfly Weed is quite drought-tolerant and will grow in rocky soils, but good drainage is essential – it will not do well in wet, heavy soils. Full sun is best though part sun is tolerated. Plants need 2 to 3 years to establish their thick taproot and reach full stature. Height can range from 2 to 3 feet.

With its deep tap root Butterfly Weed is best left undisturbed. Attempts to move mature plants are seldom successful. Young seedlings can usually be dug and relocated provided a deep and good-sized soil ball is taken with the plant.

Swamp Milkweed *Asclepias incarnata*

In the wild this is found at the edges of water, hence the name. It enjoys moisture but will also do well in average garden soil – just not those that are quite dry. They are happiest in full sun but will perform well with at least a half day of sun or indirect light for much of the day. Swamp Milkweed grows quickly and can reach a mature height of four feet or more by the second season. The blooms are deep pink, showy and fragrant. The plants do not spread by underground roots but may self sow. Seedlings are easy to weed out or dig out and move. Mature plants can also be moved – this is best done early in the season just as the plants begin to emerge.

Swamp Milkweed is an exceptional garden plant. It is easily grown, does not spread by rhizomes, is attractive to a huge range of pollinators and a favorite location for Monarch eggs. It is the most reliable and manageable choice of milkweeds for all but very dry areas if Common Milkweed is not an option.





Purple Milkweed *Asclepias purpureascens*

Purple Milkweed is a very beautiful and rare species of milkweed. It does not spread by underground roots, making it an excellent garden choice. The foliage and plant form is similar to common milkweed but the flower clusters are held more upright and are a deep magenta color. The seedpods are smooth rather than warty as are those of Common Milkweed.

Purple Milkweed is best grown on a site that is not intensely hot and sunny but receives good light for at least part of the day. Average garden soil is fine – wet, heavy clays and very sandy sites should be avoided. It appreciates organic amendments to improve soil texture and nutrients. Mulching can help control weeds, prevent soil drying, and maintain a cooler soil temperature. Purple Milkweed can be challenging and slow to establish, typically requiring three or more years to reach significant size. A mature clump is beautiful and rewarding.

Poke Milkweed *Asclepias exaltata*

This is the most shade-tolerant of Minnesota milkweed species. In the wild it grows on woodland edges and openings. It is one of the first milkweeds to put on significant growth in the spring and provides early, abundant and good quality foliage for caterpillars at a time when some of the other milkweeds are just beginning to emerge. Best conditions include a soil that stays on the cool side and has some organic matter. Indirect light is better than either full sun or substantial shade. Poke Milkweed is a moderate grower, reaching its mature height of four plus feet in 2 to 3 years. As with many natives, the ultimate stature can be quite variable and is generally greater with increased moisture and fertility. Young seedlings can be moved with care but mature plants are best left undisturbed.

Poke Milkweed blooms in early- to mid-summer. Like Common Milkweed, the flower clusters hang downward along the upper portions of unbranched stems. The large flower clusters are white, tinged with pink and green. They have a unique elegance and pleasant scent.



Whorled Milkweed *Asclepias verticillata*

Whorled Milkweed is the most diminutive of the species in Minnesota. Foliage is very fine textured with needle-like leaves arranged in whorls around 2 foot tall stems. Seedpods are noticeably thinner than those of other milkweeds. Whorled Milkweed is the last of the milkweeds to bloom in our area with blooms often persisting into late September. Flowers are cream-colored and upright-facing. It prefers full sun or very light shade and well-drained soil. It is extremely drought tolerant and will thrive in very sandy soils.

Whorled Milkweed has a rhizomatous root system and can form large colonies over time, especially in areas with poor, droughty soil where there is not significant competition from other plants. This, along with its shorter height, makes it a useful choice for boulevard and alley plantings.

General Information

All milkweeds are late to emerge in the spring. It is not uncommon for plants to remain dormant into June. Mature plants usually emerge before those that were just planted the previous season. Keeping plants marked for the first few seasons can be useful, especially for the slower growing species.

Non-native or “named” varieties of milkweeds are becoming more available. While these varieties may have more interesting color or form, they are generally not as hardy and not as desirable and beneficial to Monarchs and other pollinators as are the native species.

Do not use chemicals – especially insecticides – on milkweed plants! This includes organics, biologics and soap solutions. All stages of the Monarch's life cycle are vulnerable. Aphids can be ‘squished’ or washed off with a strong water spray, or the top, infested part of the plant can be cut off. Before doing either of these, check the plants for any eggs or caterpillars. Avoid eggs and move any caterpillars that are present.

Monarch caterpillars have a preference for new growth. This means that newly set, young plants will be favored. If the plants are particularly small they can be protected with small tents made from hardware cloth, cheesecloth, tulle or other fine meshed material. Avoid plastic tents as plants can easily overheat and rot.

Most milkweeds will readily regrow when cut back. This can be useful for removing aphids, promoting a second flush of blooms, or encouraging newer, more succulent growth for caterpillars. Simply cut the stalks back by one third to one half when flowers are spent (when they begin to discolor or seed pods start to form). Some of the species may rebloom if cut back in a timely manner. This is especially true of Swamp Milkweed and Butterfly Weed.

All milkweeds produce a milky sap that can be somewhat toxic. Milkweed plants are generally not considered a danger to people or pets. They are often avoided by deer, rabbits, and other herbivores. They may cause problems for grazing animals if eaten in large quantities.