



# Milkweed

*(Asclepias syriaca)*

By Barbara Nuffer

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Next to the dandelion, few plants engender as much childhood enthusiasm as the milkweed. The features that draw kids' attention to the ordinary-looking milkweed plant are the silky seeds that take flight on the wind when the seed pods split open in the fall.

North America is home to more than 100 species in this family, known for having "milky" sap in all parts. Common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*) plants grace fields and roadsides across New York State.

Monarch butterfly larvae (caterpillars) feed exclusively on milkweed. The ingested milkweed contains cardiac glycosides. These compounds concentrate in the wings and exoskeletons of the emerging Monarch butterflies, making them not only distasteful but potentially toxic to most predators. It is a very successful survival strategy for the monarchs!

Milkweed's purple-pink flower clusters droop downwards and have a strong fragrance. Native Americans used milkweed flowers to make a sweet jam, and after careful preparation, they ate the young shoots. The inner bark of the plant and the silk from the seed pods

were used to make fiber and cordage. The milkweed genus was named after Asclepius, the Greek god of healing. A tea, prepared from the root, was once used to treat respiratory ailments and

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kidney stones. And while compounds found in the sap may cause skin irritation, it was also used to treat warts and poison ivy.

The flowers are fertilized by many different nectar-gathering insects. However, they may pay a high price for gathering this sweet prize as a potentially lethal trap is hidden deep within the flower. The flower's complex structure features upward facing hoods. Y-shaped pollen sacs, located at the bottom of the flower hoods, can trap smaller insects. Some insects even sacrifice a leg to free themselves.

During World War II, the shortage of natural rubber resulted in unsuccessful experiments to turn milkweed's latex into a rubber-like substitute. The U.S. government also encouraged children to collect milkweed pods and used the lightweight, buoyant floss to stuff life vests and flight suits.

You can enjoy milkweed plants in three seasons: search for monarch caterpillars feeding on the foliage in the spring; smell the sweet scent of the lavender flowers in the summer; and admire the golden-colored pods and silky parachutes carrying seeds on the crisp winds of autumn.

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