



Minnesota Milkweeds for Monarchs



Information provided by Minnesota Chapters of Wild Ones

It's a simple equation

No Milkweed = No Monarchs



Milkweeds are the **ONLY** host plant for monarchs. Adult females lay their eggs exclusively on milkweed plants, and the caterpillars feed only on milkweed leaves. In recent years, there has been a drastic decline in the monarch population (down 90%). The downward trend is largely attributed to loss of milkweed in the Cornbelt due to application of herbicide on genetically modified crops. Both the eastern monarchs and their unique 2500-mile migration are at risk of extinction. To survive, they must have an adequate supply of milkweed. We can make a difference by planting milkweeds in small urban lots, waste corridors or larger acreages.



Planting milkweed will invite monarchs plus many other beneficial pollinators, including butterflies, moths, bees, flies, beetles and hummingbirds. Milkweed species native to the region provide the best habitat choice. The following six are a selection from the fourteen found in Minnesota. There is a milkweed for almost every landscape situation.

Cover Photos: Vicki Bonk



Photo: Katy Chayka, MinnesotaWildflowers.info

Common Milkweed *Asclepias syriaca*

Height: 3' | Bloom: Jun - Aug | Sun: full sun - part shade

Soil: widely tolerant | Space: 3'

A monarch favorite, this is the most commonly-found milkweed in Minnesota. It provides an abundance of foliage and nectar for monarchs and is the easiest to grow. Common Milkweed is tough, growing in most soil types including rocky, dry, sandy or heavy clays. Plants spread vigorously from deep rhizomatous roots. The large flower clusters hang loosely downward from leaf axils on the upper portion of the plant. Flowers are light to deep dusty pink, delightfully fragrant and provide nectar for an array of insects. Pods add fall and winter interest to the garden.

While gardeners may regard the wide-spreading Common Milkweed unsuited for small mixed gardens, there are good landscape options. It can share space with grasses and other vigorous natives such as asters and coneflowers, making it an excellent choice for naturalizing or for less-structured pollinator gardens. Consider planting it on woodlot edges, degraded land or in unused patches of ground along garages and in alleys.



Photo: Andy & Sally Wasowski,
Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center

Butterfly Weed *Asclepias tuberosa*

Height: 2' | Bloom: Jun - Aug | Sun: full - part sun

Soil: well-drained, dry | Space: 18"

Butterfly Weed is arguably the showiest of the species. The brilliant orange flowers attract a wide range of pollinators. It does not spread by rhizomes, making it an excellent choice for many traditional garden spaces. 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. Plants need 2 to 3 years to establish their thick taproot and reach full stature. Given 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 if a good sized and deep soil ball is taken with the plant.

Swamp Milkweed *Asclepias incarnata*

Height: 4' | Bloom: Jun - Aug | Sun: full - part sun

Soil: moist - wet | Space: 2'



Photo: Julia Vanatta

In the wild, Swamp Milkweed is found near water, hence the name. It grows quickly and can reach a mature height of four feet or more by the second season. The blooms are deep pink, showy and have a lovely vanilla fragrance attractive to many pollinators. The plants may self sow and seedlings are easy to weed or replant. Mature plants can be moved – this is best done early in the season as the plants begin to emerge.

Swamp Milkweed is an exceptional, beautiful garden plant. It is easily grown and a favorite egg repository for Monarchs. It is the most reliable and manageable choice of milkweeds for all but very dry areas.



Photo: Peter M. Dziuk, MinnesotaWildflowers.info

Purple Milkweed *Asclepias purpurascens*

Height: 2' | Bloom: Jun - Aug | Sun: full - part sun

Soil: medium, rich, well-drained | Space: 2'

Purple Milkweed is a beautiful and rare species of milkweed. The foliage and plant form is similar to Common Milkweed, but the flower clusters are held more upright and are a deep magenta color.

Purple Milkweed is best grown on a site that is not intensely hot yet receives good light for at least part of the day. Average garden soil preferred, avoid heavy clays and very sandy sites. It appreciates organic amendments to the soil that improve texture and add nutrients. While it can be challenging and slow to establish, requiring three or more years to reach significant size, a mature clump is stunning and rewarding.

Poke Milkweed *Asclepias exaltata*

Height: 3-5' | Bloom: Jun - Aug | Sun: part sun - part shade

Soil: medium, rich, well-drained | Space: 18"

The most shade tolerant of Minnesota species, in the wild it grows on woodland edges and openings. One of the first milkweeds to put on significant growth in the spring, it provides early, abundant and good quality foliage for caterpillars when most other milkweeds are just beginning to emerge. Blooming occurs early to mid-summer. Best conditions are soils that stay on the cool side and have some organic matter. Preferring indirect light, it is a moderate grower that reaches a mature height in 2 to 3 years. Young seedlings can be moved with care but mature plants are best left undisturbed.

Like Common Milkweed, flower clusters hang downward along the upper portions of unbranched stems and are white tinged with pink and green. They have a unique elegance and pleasant scent.



Photo: Peter M. Dziuk, MinnesotaWildflowers.info

Whorled Milkweed *Asclepias verticillata*

Height: 2' | Bloom: Jun - Sep | Sun: full - part sun

Soil: medium - dry | Space: 12-18"

Whorled Milkweed is the most diminutive of the Minnesota species. Foliage is very fine textured with needle-like leaves arranged in whorls around 2 foot tall stems. It 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.



Photo: Katy Chayka, MinnesotaWildflowers.info

General Information

Milkweeds are late to emerge in the spring, many remain dormant into June, so marking plants is useful. Mature plants usually emerge before those planted the previous season.

Non-native milkweeds are widely available. While these varieties may have interesting color or form and are easy to grow annually, they are generally less desirable and beneficial to monarchs and other pollinators than are the native species.



Photo: Heather Holm, PollinatorsNativePlants.com

Do not use chemicals – especially insecticides – on milkweed because all stages of the monarch's life cycle are vulnerable even to organics, biologics and soap solutions. Aphids can be 'squished' or washed off with a strong water spray, or the infested part of the plant can be cut off. Be sure to first check the plants to avoid damaging eggs and move any caterpillars that are present.

Monarch caterpillars prefer new growth and favor young plants. If plants are particularly small, they can be protected from predators 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 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). Swamp Milkweed and Butterfly Weed especially may rebloom if cut back in a timely manner.

Milkweeds produce a milky sap that, while toxic, is generally not a danger to people or pets and is often avoided by deer, rabbits, and other herbivores. It may cause problems for grazing animals if eaten in large quantities.



Wild Ones: Native Plants, Natural Landscapes promotes environmentally sound landscaping practices to preserve biodiversity through the preservation, restoration and establishment of native plant communities. Wild Ones is a not-for-profit environmental education and advocacy organization.

For a resource list of native plant nurseries offering variety of Minnesota milkweed seeds or potted plants, visit WildOnesTwinCities.org, or call (612) 293-3833.

Wild Ones Minnesota Chapters

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