

Butterfly Milkweed

(*Asclepias tuberosa* - *Asclepiadaceae*)



By Lauren Marks,
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The Butterfly Milkweed (*Asclepias tuberosa*) is a beautiful vibrant orange perennial plant that can be seen in bloom from June through September. Its rather small but brilliant orange clustered flowers makes this plant stand out among the other species of plants that are in bloom during this time and it is also the only milkweed in Illinois that has orange flowers. This native milkweed can be seen in our natural areas that have full sun. It can be located in upland sand prairies, hill prairies, cemetery prairies, sandy savannas, shale and sand stone glades, and open rocky woodlands. This species flourishes in acidic soils that are sandy and/or rocky. It will also adapt to other soil types, such as loam or clay that are well drained. The Butterfly Milkweed also has an excellent tolerance to hot dry weather. An occasional prescribed fire that reduces the competition from woody vegetation and taller herbaceous vegetation is beneficial in maintaining the populations of Butterfly Milkweed.

The Butterfly Milkweed is a herbaceous perennial plant that stands 1 to 2 ½ feet high. The central stem is light green to dull reddish purple in color and it is covered with spreading hairs. The alternate leaves along the central stem are narrow and are between 2 to 6 inches long and ½ to

¾ inch across with margins that are entire (toothless). The upper leaf surface is medium to dark green, while the lower surface is light to light-medium green in color. The short petioles grow up to 3 millimeters long. This is an unusual Milkweed because when the leaves are bruised, instead of having a milky textured sap, it has a watery clear textured sap.

Between June and September, the flat clusters of bright orange flowers are in full bloom. Sometimes people can also see this flower bloom a second time during the late summer to early autumn. These clusters are about 2 inches wide with up to 25 individually stalked flowers. This flower is about 3/8 inch wide and less than ¾ inch long with 5 petals. The central crown is divided into 5 erect heads. The Butterfly Milkweed usually has orange flowers, but it can also range between pale yellow to deep red as well. Even though these flowers are incredibly beautiful, they do not have a fragrance. Later in the season these flowers are replaced with a hairy pod, known as a follicle, which grows up to 6 inches long and ½ to ¾ inch across. The pods are light green at first but later turn brown. The follicles will split open along one side to release their seed, which will be

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dispersed by the wind. These brown flattened-oval shaped seeds are about 4 millimeters long and they contain large tufts of white hair.

The Butterfly Milkweed attracts Ruby-throated Hummingbirds and many different insects, such as bees and butterflies. One species of butterflies that benefit the most from this Milkweed is the Monarch Butterfly. Milkweed species are known to contain cardiac glycoside, which is a chemical that is poisonous to both humans and livestock. Cardiac glycoside is a useful chemical defense for Monarch Butterflies. These chemicals make the flesh of the Monarch caterpillar distasteful to most predators. Milkweeds are also the only species of plants that Monarchs lay their eggs on. Their eggs are laid on the bottom side of the leaves. The larvae will then feed and mature into a chrysalis on this plant as well.

Not only is the Butterfly Milkweed beneficial to butterflies; it is also beneficial to humans. The tough fibers from the thick woody taproot are used for making cords and ropes. The fibers are also used for weaving a coarse cloth from the dried stalks in late fall to early winter. Warning! Milkweed may be toxic when taken internally without sufficient preparation. Its tough root was chewed by Native Americans to treat pleurisy and other pulmonary ailments.



Monarch on Butterfly Milkweed



This treatment was how the Butterfly Milkweed received another common name, the Pleurisy Root. Not only is the Butterfly Milkweed used for treating pleurisy, but it is also used for other medicinal uses. These treatments include ointment for scrofulous swelling, medicine to treat diarrhea, a cure for snow blindness and other forms of blindness, relief of a sore throat, applied the chewed root for swelling and rashes on skin, to expel tapeworm, to treat colic, to act as a contraceptive, and a cure for a snakebite.

The Restoration Department staff is managing the areas where the Butterfly Milkweed is located on District properties to ensure its survival as well as the survival of other native plant species. We are managing it by controlling and removing invasive species, such as White Sweet Clover and Yellow Sweet Clover, to give our native species a chance to thrive and reproduce within our natural areas.

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