

Swamp Milkweed

by Lynn Chimera

Milkweed is the plant everyone associates with the Monarch butterfly as it is the sole food for their larva. In my quest to add natives to my garden, I happily added common milkweed (*Asclepias purpurascens*). Big mistake! It spreads way too much for my small garden. It took years to eradicate it from the front garden.

A much better selection for the home garden is Swamp Milkweed, (*Asclepias incarnata*). It behaves well, flowers beautifully, and has interesting seed pods. Not only does this beautiful plant provide food for the monarch larva it produces copious nectar that feeds many butterflies AND pollinators like honeybees.

As per its name, Swamp Milkweed prefers moist to wet soil and can even handle seasonal flooding. It will tolerate full sun to part shade but the sunnier the site the more moisture it requires. In my garden, it gets afternoon sun, the same amount of watering as the other plants, and is thriving.

Swamp milkweed grows in zones 3-9 from 2 - 4 feet tall and has beautiful clusters of long-lasting deep pink to mauve flowers in mid-to-late summer. The flowers are not ball-shaped like the field milkweed but flat (umbels). This makes it easier for pollinators to access the nectar. The leaves aren't as thick as those of common milkweed so are easier for the Monarch caterpillars to eat.

The seed pods differ from the common variety in that they are upright and quite a bit thinner. They look like little fingers pointing up. It's quite a showy plant in the home garden.

They are easy to propagate from seeds collected in the fall after the seed pods split open. Seeds can be scattered in fall or spring or cold stratify over the winter and sow in spring.

Along with all the desirable features of Swamp Milkweed, its toxic sap keeps deer and other herbivores away.

Interesting Asclepia facts:

- There are over 100 species of Asclepia in North America native to all but 7 states.
- This genus of plants is named after Asclepius, the god of medicine and healing in ancient Greek mythology.
- Milkweeds have a long history of being used for medicinal purposes because of the cardiac glycosides found in their tissue.
- As the monarch larva consumes the milkweed leaves, it retains the cardiac glycosides making the monarch toxic to predators.
- The sap can be toxic to humans and skin contact should be avoided.
- The monarch butterfly intentionally eats milkweed to become distasteful and protect itself from predators, hence the bright warning colors they feature.
- Milkweed flowers produce nectar that benefits all butterfly species.
- Hummingbirds often use the floss from milkweed seed pods to line their nests.

Information for this article came in part from Native Plants of The Northeast by Don Leopold and the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center website.



Image Lyn Chimera



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