

Balloon Plant

Gomphocarpus physocarpus E. Mey.

Hairy Balls, Swan Plant, Balloon Cotton Bush

Not a true milkweed but a close African relative, grown everywhere for its extraordinary inflated, bristly, balloon-like pods. Monarchs will use it as a host, and in frost-free regions it raises exactly the same winter-breeding concerns as tropical milkweed.



Harry Rose from South West Rocks, Australia. CC BY 2.0. Wikimedia Commons.

Key facts

Field	Value	Field	Value
Status	Introduced	Height	3ft-6ft
Flowers	white, cream	Bloom	May to October
Light	Full sun	Soil	Average
USDA zones	8-11	Leaves	opposite, narrow
Sap	Milky latex	Roots	Fibrous, clump-forming and easy to move
Stratification	None needed	States	9

How to identify it

- Pods are pale green spheres covered in soft bristles, unmistakable and unlike any *Asclepias*.
- Small waxy white flowers hanging in nodding clusters.
- Tall, shrubby, softly hairy stems with narrow willow-like leaves.

Ecology

Monarch larvae develop successfully on it, and it is widely used in butterfly houses and school rearing projects. It is native to southern Africa, not North America.

Growing

Easy from seed with no stratification and fast enough to flower in one season, so it is best grown as an annual in cold regions. In zones 9 and warmer, cut it back through winter or use a native species instead.

Cautions

Non-native. In frost-free regions its evergreen growth encourages winter monarch breeding and OE parasite build-up, exactly as tropical milkweed does.

Where it grows

Alabama, California, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, Texas

More photographs



Harry Rose from South West Rocks, Australia. C



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References

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- GBIF: <https://www.gbif.org/species/3170326>
- iNaturalist: <https://www.inaturalist.org/taxa/281273>

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