

# Common Milkweed

*Asclepias syriaca* L.

Silkweed, Virginia Silkweed

The species that feeds the eastern monarch migration. Big paddle-shaped leaves, thick stems and heavy, drooping balls of dusty-pink flowers with a scent people describe as honey and vanilla. It is also an aggressive rhizomatous colonizer: magnificent in a meadow, a menace in a perennial border.



NY State IPM Program at Cornell University from New York, USA. CC BY 2.0.

## Key facts

| Field          | Value                | Field  | Value                        |
|----------------|----------------------|--------|------------------------------|
| Status         | Native               | Height | 3ft-6ft                      |
| Flowers        | pink, mauve, white   | Bloom  | June to August               |
| Light          | Full sun, Part shade | Soil   | Dry, Average                 |
| USDA zones     | 3-9                  | Leaves | opposite, oblong             |
| Sap            | Milky latex          | Roots  | Rhizomatous, spreads by root |
| Stratification | 30 days cold-moist   | States | 40                           |

## How to identify it

- Leaves are large, broad and oblong with a prominent pale midrib, felted underneath.
- Flower clusters droop or nod rather than sitting flat on top of the stem.
- Stems are stout, usually unbranched, and covered in fine downy hair.
- Seed pods are fat, warty and covered in soft spines, unmistakable in the fall.

## Ecology

No plant supports more eastern monarch caterpillars. Large, soft leaves let a single stem raise several larvae, and dense colonies give females an easy target from the air. The flowers are among the richest nectar sources in the North American flora, feeding honey bees, bumble bees, wasps, beetles and butterflies through midsummer.

## Growing

Do not plant it in a small garden unless you intend to fight it. Rhizomes travel several feet a year and shoots pop up through lawns, paths and neighboring beds. In a meadow, hedgerow, ditch or dedicated monarch patch it is the best thing you can grow. Cut stems flush in the fall if you need to slow it, or grow it inside a sunk barrier.

## Cautions

Toxic to livestock in quantity, though animals normally avoid it. The tough rhizomes make it a listed noxious weed in a few jurisdictions, so check locally before establishing it on agricultural land.

## Where it grows

Alabama, Arkansas, Colorado, Connecticut, District of Columbia, Delaware, Georgia, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Maryland, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Mississippi, Montana, North Carolina, North Dakota, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Vermont, Wisconsin, West Virginia, Wyoming

## More photographs



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## References

- Plants of the World Online: <https://powo.science.kew.org/taxon/urn:lsid:ipni.org:names:319076-2>
- GBIF: <https://www.gbif.org/species/3170247>
- iNaturalist: <https://www.inaturalist.org/taxa/47911>
- BONAP county map: <https://bonap.net/MapGallery/County/Asclepias%20syriaca.png>

<https://milkweedusa.com/species/common-milkweed/>