

Milkweeds for Landscapes and Monarchs

By: Kelly Feehan, Extension Educator

Release: Week of January 3, 2022

Butterfly gardening has been a popular trend for some time. Planting specifically for Monarch butterfly conservation is a focus for many and that means planting milkweeds.

Milkweeds are important in the life cycle of Monarchs. The larvae, or caterpillar stage, will only feed on the leaves of plants in the milkweed family. While the milky sap is toxic, Monarch caterpillars are not affected as they feed for 10 to 14 days.

Milkweed flowers are also an important nectar source for the adults, although they will visit different flowers for nectar. And many other pollinators use milkweed blooms as a nectar source.

Due to urban and cropland expansion and the way some land is managed for gardens, lawns, and fields, milkweed populations have decreased. Hence the reason behind the push for planting milkweed.

Milkweed can be grown from seed or greenhouse grown plants. Established milkweed growing in the wild have taproots making them very difficult to transplant. It is recommended to leave these in their native habitats and start plants from seed or small transplants instead.

If seed is collected from wild plants, know the seed needs exposure to cold temperatures for three months before it will germinate. Seed can be collected and planted in the fall or the seed kept in a refrigerator crisper drawer over winter for spring planting.

Temperate zone plants have developed this seed dormancy to prevent seeds germinating during fall and seedlings being winter killed.

There are over 100 species of milkweed in the United States. In Nebraska, the three commonly grown in gardens are butterfly, swamp and common milkweed. The first two can be found as bedding plants in garden centers. Common milkweed is grown from seed.

Butterfly milkweed, *Asclepia tuberosa*, is a low growing, well behaved plant that is heat and drought tolerant. It grows about two feet tall and blooms with orange flowers from June to September. There are yellow flowered cultivars such as 'Hello Yellow'.

Butterfly milkweed is easy to grow, requires little maintenance and has few pest problems. They will attract milkweed bugs, who resemble boxelder bugs, but these do not harm the plants, monarch eggs or larvae. They only feed on milkweed seed pods.

Milkweeds may also attract oleander aphids. These are bright orange aphids that feed on plant sap. They can cause some leaf yellowing and make plants sticky due to the honeydew they excrete. They won't kill plants, but be prepared to hose them off if you find them on milkweed.

Swamp milkweed, *A. incarnata*, may not have a pretty name but it is a pretty plant that tolerates wet soils and so the name. Some now call it rose or prairie milkweed since the name swamp is not too appealing. It grows 3 to 4 feet tall and has rosy pink blooms in August and September.

While swamp milkweed tolerates brief dry periods, it performs best with consistently moist soil. Improved cultivars include 'Cinderella', 'Ice Ballet' (white flowers) and 'Soulmate'.

Common milkweed, *A. syriaca*, is the one we are most likely to see growing wild, even though butterfly and swamp milkweed are natives. Common milkweed is vigorous and somewhat weedy as it is an aggressive, suckering perennial. It grows two to three feet tall and has lavender round clusters of flowers in June and July.