

Milkweed Insects – Monarchs and More

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Milkweed has become a popular plant for attracting and supporting Monarch butterflies. Once planted in a garden, it may be noticed Monarchs are not the only insect attracted. While gardeners might become concerned about other insects, most are best not controlled with insecticides to protect Monarchs.

Common milkweed is an upright plant with round clusters of lavender flowers. It tends to multiply rapidly making other milkweeds more popular for home gardens. Butterfly milkweed is a 2 to 3-foot tall bushy plant with bright orange, flat topped flower clusters in June. Swamp milkweed is about 4 feet tall with pink, flat topped flower clusters from July into September. All three are native to Nebraska.

Milkweeds are named for the milky sap in their leaves and stems. The sap contains toxic chemicals that deter mammals and most insects from feeding on plant leaves or sap. Unlike most milkweeds, butterfly milkweed does not have milky sap but does contain the toxin.

The flowers and nectar of milkweed do not have these chemicals and pollinating insects like bees, flies and other butterflies will forage milkweed blossoms. Another benefit of planting milkweed.

Some insects are able to feed on leaves and plant sap without being poisoned. After feeding, the chemical cardiac glycoside makes insects taste bitter which protects them from being eaten by predators. At least predators that have once tasted a milkweed feeding insect. They usually don't make that mistake again.

While monarch caterpillars are the most well-known insect to feed on milkweeds, two other insects are milkweed bugs and oleander aphids. Both are orange and black like Monarchs. These colors signal predators not to eat them due to their bad taste. These are called aposematic colors or warning coloration.

Milkweed bugs are similar in appearance to boxelder bugs. The young nymphs are soft bodied and dark orange with black legs and antennae. The adults develop black and orange wing covers. Milkweed bugs feed on plant sap but mostly feed on seeds and rarely cause damage to plants.

Oleander aphids are soft bodied, bright orange insects with black appendages. They mass together on stems, buds and leaves, especially near the tips of stems. Their populations build rapidly due to parthenogenic females who reproduce young without mating, giving birth to live wingless females who are essentially pregnant when they are born.

Aphids feed on plant sap and can stress established plants or kill small or young plants if populations are high. A black sooty mold grows on the sticky honeydew aphids exude while feeding and plants can become discolored or distorted.

To prevent populations from becoming too high, aphids can be squished or hosed off the plant with a strong spray of water on a regular basis. If needed, an insecticidal soap or neem oil could be sprayed directly onto the cluster of aphids. Avoid spraying the entire plant as they insecticides are contact only.

Milkweed is the only plant Monarch caterpillars will feed on. If eggs are laid on other plants, the caterpillar will not survive after hatching. Planting milkweeds for Monarch butterflies and other pollinators is a great idea. Just be aware the plants might attract a few other insects, most of which are harmless.