

## Illinois Grazing Manual Fact Sheet

### SPECIES • POISONOUS PLANTS



# Milkweed



Photo by: Jeff McMillian  
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PLANTS Database

### Plant Characteristics

Asclepias tuberosa, and other species: Common milkweed, is an erect perennial that spreads by creeping roots and seeds. Stems can reach 3-6 feet and are unbranched and covered with short downy hairs. The leaves are oblong, 3-8 inches long with a rounded to tapered leaf tip and base. The leaves are attached directly to the stem. The plant has a milky sap arising from thick rootstock or rhizomes. The leaves are opposite and whorled or rarely alternate, simple linear to widely ovate. The under-side of the leaves are covered with fine velvet-like hairs. The upper surface, which can be hairless or hairy, shows a prominent white midrib. The flowers are borne in a large ball-like cluster and are sweet smelling, pink-lavender in color and bloom from June to August. The fruit is an elongated follicle splitting on one side and releasing many seeds topped with white silky hairs that enables them to be widely dispersed by the wind. The milkweed genus is found throughout the southern states, since it is native to North America, in reduced tillage fields, along roadsides, fence rows, open woods, pastures and waste areas. It grows best in warm, dry soils with full sunlight.

### Toxicity

All parts of the plant, whether green or dry in hay are toxic to cattle, horses, sheep, goats and poultry. Various species of milkweeds have yielded resinoids, alkaloids and glycosides. Animals consuming 2% of their body weight of the toxic plant can cause symptoms.

### Symptoms

Losses usually occur when animals are forced to graze the plant due to lack of other forage. Usual signs include staggering, depression, weakness, rapid and weak pulse, labored respiration and dilated pupils. Animals go down and exhibit tetanic spasms before going into a coma and dying, death is rare.

### Treatment

Laxatives and intravenous fluids are suggested.

### Information Sources

- Poisonous Plants of the Southern United States
- <http://plants.usda.gov/>
- Bulletin 762 Horse Nutrition, Ohio State University



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