SWAMP MILKWEED

Asclepias incarnata L.

Plant Symbol = ASIN

Alternative Names

Common Names: swamp butterfly weed, pleurisy root, marsh milkweed

Scientific Names: *Asclepias incarnata* L. ssp. *incarnata*, *Asclepias incarnata* ssp. *pulchra* (Ehrh. ex Willd.) Woodson

Figure 1: Asclepias incarnata ssp. incarnata. Photo by Noam Marcus

Description

General: Swamp milkweed is an herbaceous perennial wildflower species native to much of the US, east of the Sierra Nevada Mountain range and Southeastern Canada (Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, 2025). It grows most frequently in moist to wet soils with one to five feet tall, single or multiple upright stems with opposite lance shaped leaves (Weakley, 2012; Brown, 1984; Gleason, 1963) and does not propagate vegetatively (Agrawal 2008). Milkweeds are named for the milky white sap that most species exude when injured. The sap contains sticky latex cardenolides (heart toxins); compounds that can poison herbivores or seal their mouths (Agrawal & Malcolm, 2002). Swamp milkweed produces relatively low amounts of both sap (Brown, 1984) and concentrations of cardenolide toxins (Sternberg, 2012; Panter, 2007).

Figure 2: Asclepias incarnata ssp. pulchra. Photo by R Jay Ugiansky

Flowers/Fruit: Swamp milkweed produces one- to two-inch fragrant pink, rose-purple, or rarely white flower clusters (umbels) in the summer (Weakley, 2012) on branched inflorescences. Individual flowers are about a quarter inch wide and require insects for pollination. Flowers have five reflexed petals forming the corolla and five hoods forming the corona. The abundant nectar produced in the floral hoods attracts a large variety of pollinators (Borders, 2014). Pollination occurs when the slick, waxy corona guides a leg or other body part of an insect to a stigmatic slit where upon exit a pair of waxy pollen sacs (pollinia) may attach and are then transferred to the stigmatic slit of another flower (Eldridge, 2015). Unlike most milkweed species that are largely or fully self-incompatible (Wyatt & Broyles, 1994), swamp milkweed is neither fully self-compatible nor self-incompatible with ssp. *incarnata* showing greater self-incompatibility than ssp. *pulchra* (Ivey, 1999). In the fall, the plant produces slender green seed pods (follicles) that taper on both ends and are about two to four inches long (Figure 1). Seed pods split along a single seam as they turn brown and dry, releasing dark brown flat seeds with tufts of long silky hairs (also known as coma, floss, pappus, or silk) that allow the seeds to be carried by the wind. Each plant produces about 270 seeds (Wilbur, 1976) that mature in the fall (Kephart, 1987).

Leaves/Stems/Roots: Swamp milkweed has many two to six-inch long lance-shaped leaves that progress in pairs up the stem (Weakley, 2012). In the fall, green leaves may take on purple shading. Subspecies *incarnata* (Figure 1) has narrower one half to two-inch smooth (glabrous) leaves and stems with inconspicuous or no hairs and stems often have many branches (Weakley, 2012; Brown, 1984; Gleason, 1963). Subspecies *pulchra* (Figure 2) has densely hairy (pubescent) stems and leaves, has broader leaves up to three inches wide that more abruptly taper at the base and has stems with little to no branching (Weakley, 2012; Brown, 1984; Gleason, 1963). Stems grow from a single crown (Ivey 2003) with relatively unbranched fleshy white roots (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Root system of Asclepias incarnata ssp. Pulchra. Yellow lines are one foot apart for scale. Photo by R Jay Ugiansky

Distribution: Swamp milkweed occurs in central and eastern Canada and throughout most of Unites States except for Mississippi and the west coast states of Washington, Oregon, and California (Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, 2025). The *pulchra* subspecies is more commonly found in the coastal plain and piedmont than in the mountains (Weakley, 2012). Subspecies *pulchra* is native to states and provinces bordering the Atlantic from Nova Scotia to Florida as well as Vermont, Tennessee, and Texas (Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, 2025). With some exceptions, ssp. *incarnata* grows mostly west from the Appalachians across the Northeast, Midwest and the Great Plains. With some exceptions, ssp. *pulchra* grows mostly east from the Appalachians through the Piedmont and Coastal Plain from Nova Scotia to northern Georgia. (GBIF 2025). For current distribution, please consult the Plant Profile page for this species on the PLANTS Web site.

Habitat: Swamp milkweed frequently grows in wet fields, marshes, meadows and the floodplains and shores of rivers and streams but can also be found in drier mesic fields and prairies (Weakley, 2012; Brown, 1984; Gleason, 1963). It has been observed growing in a wide range of elevations from 0-7,500 ft (GBIF, 2025).

Adaptation

Swamp milkweed prefers neutral to slightly acidic soil and can tolerate heavy clay soils (NC State Extension, n.d.). Although swamp milkweed is primarily found in moist habitats it will also grow in drier mesic areas such as prairies, fields, and roadsides (GBIF, 2025). Subspecies *pulchra* has outstanding tolerance to somewhat brackish water (Woodson, 1954). Swamp milkweed grows best in full sun though it can tolerate part shade; in 60% shade, it produces less aboveground and belowground biomass, though the total plant height is not affected (Coverdale & Agrawal, 2020). Swamp milkweed grows significantly less when deprived of the arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi that usually associate with its roots (Malik & Bever, 2021). It adapts well to landscape plantings with moist to well-drained soils and in plantings near bodies of water.

Uses

Conservation: Swamp milkweed is a native, perennial wildflower useful for wetland plantings. It is a good component of a wildlife seed mixture when seeded with native grasses and wildflowers. Johnston et al., (2015) observed that swamp milkweed weed was among the three quickest establishing species of the 29 native species planted at five Georgia locations.

Wildlife: Ivey et al. (2003) observed 70 species of insects from 34 families and 6 orders foraging for nectar on swamp milkweed, including 21 species of butterflies. Swamp milkweed relies on a wide variety of pollinators, especially bees (order Hymenoptera) for pollination. Swamp milkweed is a favored food of monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*) and queen butterfly (*Danaus glippus*) larvae (Brower, 1961; Jones & Agrawal, 2019). Other common insects that feed on milkweed include the milkweed tussock moth (*Euchaetes egle*), red milkweed beetle (*Tetraopes tetrophthalmus*), milkweed leaf beetle *(Labidomera clivicollis)* and milkweed bugs (*Lygaeus kalmia*

and *Oncopeltus fasciatus*; Johnson, 2021). Physiological adaptations of these milkweed specialist herbivores allow them to sequester cardenolides for use as a potent defense against predators (Malcolm, 1991; Panter, 2007) and parasites (Sternberg et al., 2012). The hollow stems of swamp milkweed can provide nesting habitat for stem-nesting bees (Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation, 2023). Cutting or breaking the dormant stems at a variety of heights above the ground creates a variety of nesting hole sizes, and the cut tops can be bundled and left in a sheltered place for additional nesting habitat (Jordan et al., 2020). Some birds use the seed floss as nesting material (Borders & Lee-Mäder, 2014).

Landscaping: Swamp milkweed is deer resistant (Xerces Society for invertebrate conservation, 2023) and can be used in rain gardens (Sulpizio, 2024).

Fiber Production: Early American settlers would occasionally stuff pillows with the floss of abundantly growing milkweeds such as *A. incarnata* or *A. syriaca* (Woodson, 1954). In World War II, the U.S. Department of Agriculture worked largely with rural schools to collect large quantities of milkweed floss for the stuffing of life jackets (Woodson, 1954). More recently, milkweed has been investigated as a fiber source for biodegradable surgical gowns (Mula et al., 2023); and as a superabsorbent material for many applications including personal hygiene and water purification products (Sabziparvar et al., 2022); these applications are not exclusive to swamp milkweed.

Ethnobotany

Linnaeus named the genus after Asklepios, the Greek god of medicine, in recognition of the plant's historical use in medicine (Flora of North America Association, 2024). The Iroquois used an infusion of the roots externally to strengthen the body and heal babies' navels; they also used the stem to make a cord for extracting teeth (Herrick, 1995). The Chippewa have also used the plant as an emetic and anthelmintic (de-worming agent; Densmore, 1928). Swamp milkweed is toxic when taken in large doses (Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, 2012).

Status

Threatened or Endangered: Swamp milkweed is listed as Least Concern (IUCN 3.1)

Wetland Indicator: Swamp milkweed is considered an obligate wetland plant (almost always occurring in wetlands) in most regions of the U.S. except the Great Plains where it is listed as a facultative wetland plant (usually occurring in wetlands but occasionally occurring in non-wetlands; US Army Corps of Engineers, 2020).

Weedy or Invasive: Swamp milkweed is not considered invasive in North America (University of Georgia, 2018), but by the middle of the 19th century common milkweed (*A. syriaca*) and swamp milkweed had escaped cultivation throughout Europe (Woodson, 1954).

Please consult the PLANTS Web site (http://plants.usda.gov/) and your state's Department of Natural Resources for this plant's current status (e.g., threatened or endangered species, state noxious status, and wetland indicator values).

Planting Guidelines

Swamp milkweed has approximately 100,000 seeds per pound (Society for Ecological Restoration, 2023). Seed is best sown just below the surface (Borders & Lee-Mäder, 2014); up to a depth of ¼ inch deep for heavy clay soils and up to a depth of ¾ inch for light sandy soils. Fall seeding exposes seeds to the cold, moist conditions needed to stimulate germination in the spring. Spring seeding may result in less weed competition since germination can occur shortly after controlling weeds and sowing. If spring seeding, seeds should be artificially stratified to improve germination (Finch et al., 2019).

Management

Since swamp milkweed grows tall (up to 5 ft; Weakley, 2012; Brown, 1984; Gleason, 1963) some gardeners suggest planting milkweeds in landscaping with shorter companion plants (Cotsonas, 2023; van der Linde, 2024). Planting swamp milkweed in dense stands suppresses weeds (Milburn, 1945). Swamp milkweed plants can be short-lived; a single individual can live for 5-10 years (Milburn, 1945) and this species has a relatively high mortality rate (22% in Michigan, Wilbur, 1976). Therefore, it is important to allow plants to produce seed (which they can do in their first year; Milburn 1945) to sustain a healthy population.

Pests and Potential Problems

Some milkweed specialist herbivores can reach high enough densities to weaken plants and seed production (Borders & Lee-Mäder, 2014). Oleander aphids were shown to reduce the growth of swamp milkweed (Zehnder, 2007). Large milkweed bugs occasionally eat the seeds of swamp milkweed, though they prefer common milkweed (Chaplin & Chaplin, 1981). Milkweed stem weevil bores into stems of swamp milkweed (Arcila Hernández et al., 2020).

Environmental Concerns

Livestock: The cardenolide toxin content of swamp milkweed is very low (Panter et al., 2011) but can have toxic effects in livestock. Feeding swamp milkweed to sheep led to increased heart rate, shortness of breath, increased white blood cell count, irritability, and groaning (Ogden, 1989). All species of milkweed are distasteful, and livestock avoid them when there are other forages available (Kinsbury, 1964). Severe losses have occurred only under conditions of mismanagement or drought where sheep were forced to eat milkweed (Kingsbury, 1964). Animals may be poisoned by hay contaminated with large amounts of Milkweed (USDA Agricultural Research Service, 2018).

Warning: Milkweed may be toxic when taken internally without sufficient preparation.

Control

Please contact your local agricultural extension specialist or county weed specialist to learn what works best in your area.

Seeds and Plant Production

Artificially cold stratify seeds to improve germination by placing seeds in plastic bags filled with moist perlite, vermiculite, sand or other sterile media and refrigerated at approximately 35 to 38 degrees Fahrenheit, for four to six weeks (Borders & Lee-Mäder, 2014). Swamp milkweed may require more than one year to flower and produce seed (Borders, 2014). Harvest pods when they just begin to split or can be induced to spilt with gentle pressure to reveal mature brown seeds. It is best to immediately strip the seed from the floss before the floss has expanded, become messy and more difficult to separate from the seed. Collecting pods at this stage can be challenging and require frequent trips to the field, since seed is dispersed within a day or so of the pod beginning to split (Borders & Lee-Mäder, 2014). To avoid losing seed, pods can be covered in paper or mesh bags. Readily available organza bags with a draw string work well as they hold on well, have good ventilation and pods can easily be viewed.

Several weevil larvae prey on developing seeds, so look for signs of damage including small entry holes in the pod exuding latex. Seed pods often may have little to no viable mature seed due to weevil damage or infertile unfilled seeds. Unfilled seeds will be flat like paper and not have a swollen filled center. After harvesting allow the seeds to dry for one to two weeks in paper or mesh bags. Borders & Lee-Mäder (2014) outline numerous methods for cleaning large quantities of seed but found that using shop vacuums with a cartridge filter is a preferred method to process practically any quantity. The gentle and contained action of a shop vac is less messy and gentler on the seed than other equipment such as brush machines, debearders, and hammer mills.

Cultivars

These plant materials are readily available from commercial sources such as native plant nurseries and seed suppliers. 'Ice Ballet' is a white cultivar and 'Cinderella' has pink flowers with white centers.

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