



*Pictured is a butterfly on the  
Asclepias incarnata buds.*

# Native Plant Highlight: Milkweeds

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*This article is courtesy of the Coast Plain Chapter of the Georgia Native Plant Society. The GNPS is dedicated to promoting the stewardship and conservation of Georgia's native plants and their habitats. The Coastal Plain Chapter serves the people in the Coastal Plain ecoregion of Georgia. This includes all areas south of the Fall Line in middle Georgia, from the Alabama and Florida borders to the Atlantic ocean. To learn more, please visit their [website](#).*

Native milkweeds have become very popular in gardening in recent years as the plight of the Monarch has become more known. While many species of the milkweed are not well-adapted to garden settings, there are three main species that do well in Southern landscapes.

**Butterfly weed** (*Asclepias tuberosa*) has bright orange flowers that needs dry, sandy soil; **aquatic milkweed** (*Asclepias perennis*) is a small plant with tiny white flowers that needs moist to wet soil; **swamp milkweed** (*Asclepias incarnata*) has clumps of pink flowers and is more tolerant of typical garden soil. Also called rose milkweed and pink swamp milkweed, it is one of the easiest to grow and most successful at supporting monarch reproduction.

## The Monarch Crisis

In 2014, the populations of monarch butterflies that migrate throughout Eastern North America and over-winter in Mexico were down 97percent! This information motivated much action to prevent the extinction of the migration and efforts have been made to reduce the destruction of the forests in Mexico where adult monarchs rest for the winter.

In the USA and Canada, there have been campaigns to increase the populations of

milkweeds in North America, where the monarchs reproduce. The proliferation of monoculture GMO crops accompanied by massive use of herbicides in farming and along roadsides has drastically reduced milkweed populations and other native plants needed for biodiversity.

There are government programs to encourage spaces for nectar and host plants in the countryside, along roads and power corridors, and near fields. And many individuals and groups are planting milkweeds in their gardens, parks and communities. While monarch populations have increased, they are nowhere near where they were in the 1970s.

It's important to avoid planting tropical milkweed (*Asclepias curassavica*), which does not die back over winter in warmer climates. These milkweeds that don't die back, as native milkweeds do, or get cut back, are much more likely to carry the disease, OE, that causes casualties and deformity in monarch caterpillars and butterflies.

A non-migrating population has been established in Florida as tropical milkweeds became invasive there, with significant monarch losses and infestations of native populations.

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People are now encouraged to replace any tropical milkweeds with natives, and be sure to cut any tropicals left to the ground in October and again in January.



Butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*)

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### **The Symbiotic Relationship between Monarchs and Milkweed**

The food for most adult butterflies is the nectar from a variety of flowers. In return the butterflies and other pollinators enable the plants to reproduce by spreading the pollen of the flowers. However, when it comes to reproduction, there is great specialization between the plants and animals.

Many insects can lay their eggs only on specific plants (called host plants), as these are the only ones their young can eat. As plants and pollinators

evolved together, the insects specialized on specific plants for their caterpillars, evolving the defenses required to tolerate the chemicals those specific plants produce.

There are three types of butterflies, including the Monarch that are adapted only to plants in the milkweed family. While the adults can nectar on many plants, they will lay their eggs only on milkweeds. No milkweed, no new generations of these butterflies.

Likewise, the growing season of the milkweed coincides with the monarch's migration.

In spring, established plants will re-emerge from the ground and grow all summer. The flowers bloom in August and September in the South. This is when we see the most monarchs, as they return South and the last generation for the year is produced. That migrating generation will travel through Texas (up to 2500 miles, 50 to 100 miles per day!, roosting in large groups at night) to spend the winter roosting in great masses in oyamel fir trees in the Sierra Madre Mountains in Mexico.

Monarchs are one of the few butterflies with a long migration. In March they migrate back to the southeastern US with successive generations stopping to reproduce, growing about 3-4 more generations as they go further and further North.. The northernmost generation migrates back South in late summer when the swamp milkweed is blooming, so we are most likely to see our greatest numbers of monarchs and reproduction in August through October. Then the plants go dormant as the weather cools.

All native milkweeds die back completely in the fall, and usually return the next spring. It is a good idea

to cut the large bare stems of swamp milkweed back to the ground after the leaves drop, as they will not re-sprout from the stems the next year and might carry disease.

Fall is the natural time to plant seeds outside. To grow in pots, it is ok to wait until spring but you should keep the seeds in the refrigerator (to mimic winter cold).

### Growing Milkweed

Swamp milkweed grow naturally in much of the USA and eastern Canada, hardy in zones 3 to 8. They can be grown in the ground or in large pots. Pink swamp milkweed can grow up to four to five feet tall, with thick woody stems and long leaves. The flowers, like all milkweeds, come in dense clusters, they are a delicate pink in color and some say have a subtle vanilla scent. Quite lovely! They do not spread aggressively.

It is easiest to start with healthy plants, preferably from a native nursery or native plant sale. Big box stores are notorious for putting pesticides on or in their plants with inconsistent warnings.

In the spring, the native milkweed plants may be dormant, so all you see is soil. Each plant will do best if given about 3 square feet to grow in mostly full sun, with some shade tolerated.

They are happy to grow in wet and moist soils like they do in the wild. They need to be watered when first planted; but once established in the garden, they do not necessarily require watering except in drought. They produce seed pods similar to okra and the seeds have floss like dandelions to carry them in the wind.

### Pests

Unfortunately, many milkweeds attract significant

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## Southern SOIL

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pests. Of course you don't want to use any kind of pesticide or harsh chemicals anywhere near or on pollinator plants, as they can kill the butterflies, their caterpillars, and other pollinators, too!

The most harmful pests are the exotic oleander aphids, tiny orange insects that suck the juice out of young leaves and flower buds. They can do significant damage to the plants if not removed.

We smash the aphids with our fingers with no regret, as they are not natives. This will definitely get your fingers orange, but it washes off easily. It is best to eliminate them while the plants are little, as their populations can multiply rapidly and they become very difficult or impossible to control. They can even reproduce asexually! (That seems downright unfair!) Many people wait for ladybugs and mantids to eat them, but we haven't found this very effective in a garden setting.



Aincarnata Plant

Predation is natural, but we wouldn't buy ladybugs for the garden, as many sold are exotics and take the place of the natives, and most fly away. Some other gardeners remove aphids with: water spray bottles, small vacuums made for electronics, brushes, tape or removing infested branches. Companion planting with marigold, onion or garlic may also prove helpful.

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***Asclepias variegata*. This is an invasive species of swampweed and can be harmful to Monarch populations, avoid planting in native gardens.**



Space groupings away from each other to minimize the spread of infestations.

### **Protecting Seeds**

Seeds and seedpods are the favorite food of the milkweed bug, a bright orange and black true bug about ½ inch long. We smash most of these colorful beetles, which also specialize (reproduce) on milkweed. You could also knock them off into soapy water. Their nymphs are funny looking

little things that grow through 5 stages, but in our gardens they have to go too!

If you want to grow seeds or more plants for yourself or to share, you can also put little net bags over the seedpods. You can find these in the wedding decor section of stores. Pull the strings tight over the base of the seedpod when it is small. This works well to protect the young seeds and hold the mature ones until you can harvest them.

You can make a difference for biodiversity by protecting and growing native plants and trees, and support the survival of the monarch migration by growing native milkweeds! I recommend you try pink swamp milkweed.

*Beth Grant is Founder and President of Friends of Lost Creek Forest in Thomas County, GA, and has been the lead volunteer for ten years at the large public Cherokee Pollinator Garden at Cherokee Lake Park in Thomasville. She has volunteered at Birdsong Nature Center and its Butterfly Garden for over 20 years and has taught a slide show of Dr. Doug Tallamy's book Bringing Nature Home over 50 times at Birdsong, garden clubs, libraries, schools, and symposia.* 🌿



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