

Wildflower in Focus

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Swamp Milkweed

Asclepias incarnata L.

Milkweed Family (*Asclepiadaceae*)



Milkweeds have long been magnets for children, with their irresistible feathered seeds bursting from canoe-shaped follicles in late summer and autumn. Thirteen milkweed species are indigenous to Maryland, serving as host and nectar plants for butterflies and attracting a wide range of other colorful insects that have found adaptive means to cope with the toxic milky sap that many milkweeds contain. Swamp milkweed flowers are a deeper pink than the more familiar common milkweeds (*A. syriaca*), their leaves are narrower, and as the name implies, they favor moist habitats. When I take my summer wildflower identification class to a pond near Sugarloaf Mountain, the students swoon over the swamp milkweed umbels lining the shore, and the halos of butterflies surrounding them. Butterfly expert Pat Durkin says: “Whenever I see swamp milkweed, it’s quite popular as a nectar source with all the butterflies in the vicinity. As soon as I spot it, I wade right over because they’re all there, easy to observe.” According to Stanwyn G. Shetler and Sylvia Stone Orli’s *Annotated Checklist of the Vascular Plants of the Washington-Baltimore Area* (Smithsonian Institution), most swamp milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*) plants in the Washington-Baltimore area

flora fit the characteristics of variety *pulchra*. Wesley M. Knapp, Eastern Region Heritage Ecologist and Botanist with Maryland DNR’s Wildlife and Heritage Service, describes variety *pulchra* as: “...moderately to densely pubescent, with broader leaves having rounded to subcordate bases, apex acute to short-acuminate, and plants relatively strict [straight and upright].” Another subspecies or variety of the plant that may be found in Maryland and Virginia is *incarnata*, which Wes distinguishes by: “stems and leaves sparsely pubescent to glabrescent, leaves narrow, the base obtuse to truncate, with a long-acuminate apex. These plants are usually much branched.”

Flowers: Small, 1/4 - 1/3 inches long, usually rose-pink, in large, rounded, upright umbels. Flower configuration unique to milkweeds: the 5 petals are reflexed beneath a 5-parted crown-like corona containing 5 “hoods” and 5 incurved “horns.” Each anther bears two waxy masses of pollen [called a *pollinium*/ plural = *pollinia*). According to Alonso Abugattas, Arlington County naturalist and director of the Long Branch Nature Center: “These [pollinia] attach to potential pollinators’ legs when they stop by to collect the vast amounts of nectar *Asclepias* species produce. Occasionally, though, a small insect gets its leg caught in the slits that contain these structures and it is not strong enough to pull itself out. The small insect then may struggle until it dies or falls prey to a predator, unable to escape. On many occasions I have found these small corpses hanging by a leg or proboscis from a flower.”

Fruit: Swamp milkweed follicles are slender and finely pubescent, 2-4 inches long and tapered at both ends. They split open to release many seeds, bearing fluffy hairs that suit them for blowing or flinging through the air (thus their popularity with children).

Leaves: Opposite, simple, 3-6 inches long, with entire margins. Lanceolate to oblong-lanceolate, glabrous or sparsely pubescent (although locally common variety *pulchra* is quite pubescent). Apex acuminate; base acute, rounded or subcordate.

Height: 2-6 feet.

Habitat and Range: Wet meadows, pond edges, stream banks, freshwater marshes, swamps; Nova Scotia to Florida, west to Saskatchewan, Utah and New Mexico.

Herbal Lore: According to Alonso, the genus *Asclepias* is named after the Greek god of healing,

reflecting the traditional medical uses of milkweeds. Steven Foster and James A. Duke (*Peterson Field Guides: Eastern/Central Medicinal Plants*) report: Swamp milkweed “root tea [is] diuretic, carminative, strongly laxative; induces vomiting. American colonists used it for asthma, rheumatism, syphilis, worms, and as a heart tonic. **Warning:** Potentially toxic.” Maryland Native Plant Society board member, master gardener and weed warrior Marney Bruce (founder of Simplicity Matters Earth Institute) says that author Timothy Coffey “writes that Pueblo Indians cut it down when ripe, rub it so as to separate the fibers, and make of it beautiful and very strong fishing lines and fine sewing-thread. He notes that early botanists remarked at how tough and strong the stem is.” When I queried a few members and friends of the Maryland Native Plant Society about swamp milkweed and milkweeds in general I discovered a wide-spread and deep fascination for this genus. Dr. Edward M. Barrows, biology professor at Georgetown University and director of the Georgetown University Center for the Environment, shared many wonderful milkweed stories and this is my favorite: “When I was on Oahu, Hawaii in 1976 during a lovely November day with an ocean breeze, I was amazed to see giant milkweed shoots which were about 10 feet tall growing in a garden.” Dr. Barrows noted: “This plant might have been *Calotropis procera*=*Asclepias procera*, Giant Milkweed, native to West Africa through India.” He went on to say: “I had to rub my eyes to make sure I wasn’t dreaming in Rousseau Land... The plants looked like giant, mutant *Asclepias syriaca* to me, and it seemed like the Mean Giant might descend on them at any moment looking for children to eat. I saw normal-sized Monarchs nectaring on the flowers. Both species are aliens on Oahu—a poor, hapless island under water in aliens.”

Similar Species: More than a dozen milkweeds are indigenous to Maryland. Deep rose-pink corollas and moist habitats are the best means of separating swamp milkweed plants from other locally indigenous species.

Blooming Time: June - August.

Fruiting Time: Fruits mature and split open during summer and autumn.

Locations: Common throughout Maryland. Montgomery County forest ecologist and MNPS board member Carole Bergmann writes: “I have seen *Asclepias incarnata* in Rachel Carson Conservation Park, Little Bennett Regional Park, Black Hill Regional Park, Dickerson Conservation Park, Rock Creek SVP, Serpentine Conservation Park to name a

few. Also on County property along the Blue Mash Trail near the Laytonsville Landfill. Its color and flower shape really appeal to me, and so I am always happy to spot it.” As for other *Asclepias* in the county park system, that she has seen, Carole lists “*A. purpurascens* in Serpentine Conservation Park, Little Bennett Regional Park, and in the field across from Hoyles Mill park where gentians are; *A. verticillata* in Serpentine Conservation Park and Hoyles Mill Conservation Park; *A. viridiflora* also in Serpentine Conservation Park, Hoyles Mill Conservation Park, and Lois Green Conservation Park; *A. tuberosa* – a lot at Little Bennett Conservation Park and, of course, *A. syriaca* in many many many parks!”

Karyn Molines, supervisor of cultural resources for the Anne Arundel County Department of Parks and Recreation and MNPS board member, sees swamp milkweed at Jug Bay Wetlands Sanctuary, where she also finds *A. tuberosa*, *A. syriaca*, and *A. amplexicaulis*. Author, educator and MNPS board member Cris Fleming finds *A. incarnata* at Hughes Hollow in the McKee-Beshers WMA. Consult *Finding Wildflowers in the Washington-Baltimore Area* (Fleming, Lobstein and Tufty) for more swamp milkweed locations.

Many members and friends of the Maryland Native Plant Society contributed to this article, including: Alonso Abugattas, Carole Bergmann, Edward M. Barrows, Marney Bruce, Pat Durkin, Cris Fleming, Wesley M. Knapp, Karyn Molines, and Rod Simmons. Thank you to everyone who contributed!