

Horticulture Hints

A Publication of the Floral City Garden Club
March 2023

Presented by Kathy Lingusky

I do believe that summer is just about here, despite what the calendar says. I have enjoyed these days so much! The cool mornings are just glorious for dog-walking and gardening, and the warmth of the day is just as glorious to do things like write Horticulture Hints.

Last month, we discussed the ramifications of exotic milkweeds in the survival of monarch butterflies. If you missed that particular issue, I have provided a link in the email to which this newsletter is attached. And as promised, here is some information on different milkweeds. I have found a great deal of conflicting information as far as exactly how many milkweeds are native, but these are some that everyone seems to agree on:



Swamp Milkweed

1. Swamp milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*). This milkweed is also known as pink swamp milkweed or marsh milkweed. This might give you an idea as to what kind of conditions it would like. It is an upright, short-lived perennial, and comes in varieties that include several shades of pink, as well as white. It grows 2-2 1/2 feet tall by 1 1/2 to 3 feet wide. It is clumping, meaning that it will spread outward, forming new plants on the outer edges of the clump. The good thing about most of these is that they go dormant in the winter, causing the OE to die, allowing the monarch caterpillars to thrive without picking up excessive amounts of it. Plant in moist to wet areas, in full sun to part shade. It will grow in clay, loam or sand, as long as it gets enough water. Bloom time is late summer into

fall. None of the milkweeds appear to be tolerant of salt water or salty spray. **Warning:** All parts of milkweeds are highly toxic to grazing animals, therefore should not be planted where cattle or other livestock may graze.

2. Whorled milkweed (*Asclepias verticillata*). This one is one of the smaller, more delicate looking of the milkweeds. It grows in pinelands throughout much of Florida. When not in bloom, it is easily overlooked. Thin needle-like leaves grow in a whorled pattern up the single stem, hence the common name. It only grows to about two feet, and about a foot wide. It can seed, but mostly grows in small colonies, and needs to be reseeded once every several years. It grows in pretty much any native soil, and doesn't need to be amended to be happy. It is also fairly drought



Whorled Milkweed

tolerant once established, but appreciates frequent watering until then. The small, white blooms form from late spring through late summer/early fall.

3. White milkweed (*Asclepias variegata*). The species name describes the bicolored flowers, which are quite showy in masses. The white milkweed thrives in open upland forests and woodland edge habitats, sandy open ground, ravine bottoms, low woods, slopes, ridges, and roadsides. Plant in full sun to light shade in dry clay, loam, or rocky soil. This low maintenance plant reaches a mature size of 1 to 3 feet tall and wide. The most rapid growth and development of this plant occurs during the spring after the danger of hard frost has passed. Small, white flowers dotted with purple in the center form a large, round, showy cluster that blooms May-July. One or two large wart-like pods with fluffy wind-dispersed seeds mature in the late summer. Planted en masse, this plant is a beautiful showcase, and will attract many pollinators, including monarchs.



White Milkweed

4. Aquatic milkweed - also called white swamp milkweed (*Asclepias perennis*). This is the 'other' swamp milkweed, and is apparently quite a different species from the pink. It only grows to about two feet, but can have multiple stems, each with a flower cluster at the top. It seems to be fairly common in the wild, and I have seen it online from native nurseries in central Florida, sold as a live plant. It can survive fairly shady conditions, but will become lankier and have fewer flowers. It thrives on wet-to-well-drained soil, and will flower best in these conditions.



5. Sandhills milkweed or pinewoods milkweed (*Asclepias humistrata*). 'Humistrata' means 'low growing' or 'sprawling'. Has the largest leaves of any milkweed on this page, meaning that it has plenty of food available to the monarch caterpillars. The stems are sprawling to upright, with leaves that are green or green with pink to purple veining. The flowers form white to pink to lavender, and bloom sporadically from spring through fall. May go dormant in the winter, but possibly not. In the wild, they grow in sandhills, and dry and possibly disturbed areas. As with all milkweeds, they have a long taproot, and don't like to be moved. If this one is located in a moist or wet area, it will quickly rot and perish.



Sandhills Milkweed

6. Butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*). Last but not least, this one has brilliant orange flowers, and should not be confused with butterfly *bush* (*Buddleia* genus). Butterfly weed is a short-lived perennial that occurs naturally in sandhills, pine flatwoods, and other sandy uplands, as well as along sunny roadsides. As the name would imply, it has a fibrous root, and prefers dry, well drained soil. It blooms more or less continually through fall, and goes dormant in cooler months. This is the least preferred of all the milkweeds by the monarch on which to lay eggs because it contains the least amount of the toxin that protects the caterpillars from predation. But it is a beautiful flower that will be a boon to any flower or wildflower garden.



Butterfly Weed

This is not an exhaustive list by any means, but may give you a place to start if you want to replace your exotic milkweed plants. As with any other plant, 'Right plant, right place' will go a long way to success. Google is a good friend when you're trying to find any of these. Next month, we'll discuss milkweed propagation. Should be interesting.

As always, happy gardening! See ya soon!