

Butterfly milkweed

(*Asclepias tuberosa*)

For definitions of botanical terms, visit en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary_of_botanical_terms.

Butterfly milkweed is a perennial that occurs naturally in sandhills, pine flatwoods, and other sandy uplands as well as along sunny roadsides. It is the larval host of Monarch, Queen and Soldier butterflies. It blooms spring through fall, attracting hummingbirds, bees and other pollinators.

Butterfly milkweed's bright orange to reddish flowers are born in showy terminal umbels. Each flower has a reflexed corolla and an upright corona — a characteristic typical of milkweed flowers. Stems are rough to hairy. Leaves are coarse, narrowly ovate to lanceolate, and oppositely arranged. Seeds are born in erect follicles that dry and split open as the fruit matures. Each seed is attached to a white silky pappus that catches the wind and aids in dispersal.

Florida has two subspecies: *A. tuberosa* ssp. *rolfsii* is less bushy, has wavy leaf margins, and occurs throughout Florida. *A. tuberosa* ssp. *tuberosa* has flatter, narrow leaves and is often found in woodlands in northern Florida.

Asclepias tuberosa is an exception to the *Asclepias* genus in that its stem does not contain the milky latex that distinguishes the rest of the genus and gives it the common name "milkweed."

Butterfly milkweed is sometimes referred to as pleurisy root because Native Americans chewed the root of the plant to treat pleurisy. Today, it is commercially available as an extract and as a dried root powder.

Family: Apocynaceae (Dogbane family)

Native range: Nearly throughout

To see where Butterfly milkweed occurs naturally, visit florida.plantatlas.usf.edu.

Hardiness: 8A–10B

Soil: Dry, well-drained, sandy soil

Exposure: Full sun

Growth habit: 1–3' tall, with 1–2' spread

Propagation: Seed, division, cuttings

Garden tips: Butterfly milkweed is an excellent addition to butterfly gardens as well as any dry, hot landscape.

Caution: Do not confuse this plant with the nonnative Tropical milkweed (*A. curassavica*), which is typically sold at big box retail garden centers. Tropical milkweed does not die back in winter in Florida (as do native milkweeds) and can encourage overwintering in adult Monarchs. It is also linked to the transmission of the *Ophryocystis elektroscirrha* (OE) infection.

Seeds may be available through the Florida Wildflowers Growers Cooperative www.FloridaWildflowers.com. Plants are occasionally available at nurseries that specialize in native plants. Visit PlantRealFlorida.org to find a native nursery on your area.



Photo by Mary Keim