Carolina milkweed

(Asclepias cinerea)

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

Photo by Emily Bell

With its narrow leaves and fine stems, Carolina milkweed can get lost among the wiregrass with which it typically grows. But its splendidly stellar blooms will stop you in your tracks. You'll find it flowering in summer in sandhills, pine flatwoods and bogs throughout the Panhandle and North Florida.

Carolina milkweed flowers are born in loose axillary or terminal umbels. Each flower bears a five-lobed calyx and five-lobed corolla, both of which may be lavender, pale purple or even grayish-white. Corolla lobes may be reflexed, but generally remain flat, giving the bloom a star-like appearance. The narrow, linear leaves are few and oppositely arranged. Leaf surface is glabrous. Stems and flower stalks are delicately thin; they bend under the weight of the inflorescences, causing the flowers to droop. Seeds are born in smooth, 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.

The genus *Asclepias* is named for Asclepius, the Greek god of healing. The species epithet *cinerea* is from the Latin *cinereus*, meaning "ash-like" or "ash-colored."

Like all members of the *Asclepias* genus, Carolina milkweed is a larval host plant for Monarch, Queen and Soldier butterflies. The plant contains a milky latex that is toxic to most animals, but Monarch, Queen and Soldier caterpillars are adapted to feed on them despite the chemical defense. The flowers are an important nectar source for bees and wasps.

Family: Apocynaceae (Dogbane family)
Native range: Panhandle, peninsula south to Marion County
To see where natural populations of Carolina milkweed have been vouchered, visit www.florida.plantatlas.usf.edu.
Lifespan: Perennial
Soil: Moist, well-drained soils
Exposure: Full sun to filtered shade
Growth habit: ±2′ tall

Carolina milkweed plants are not commercially available.
Visit a natural area to see them.

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