



# MILKWEEDS OF COLORADO



Milkweeds (*Asclepias* spp.) are herbaceous perennial plants named for their milky sap. These plants occur in a wide range of habitats, including intact natural communities on roadsides and highly disturbed roadsides. As required host plants for monarch (*Danaus plexippus*) caterpillars, milkweeds play an essential role in the butterfly's life cycle (see reverse). Vegetation management that allows milkweeds to persist can support monarchs. This guide can help you recognize the most common native species found on roadsides in your region.

## KEY

↑  
MAX  
HEIGHT  
↓

RHIZOMATOUS  
MAY BE MORE  
TOLERANT OF MOWING

## The most common milkweeds in roadsides in Colorado (in alphabetical order):

### Spider milkweed (*A. asperula* ssp. *asperula*)

**PLANT:** Multiple spreading stems, unbranched to few branches; usually smooth. **LEAVES:** Alternate; lance-shaped; usually folded lengthwise. **HABITAT:** Prairie, disturbed areas. **SOILS:** Sandy, gravelly, clayey, rocky limestone; dry. **BLOOM:** Apr-Jun; light green with touches of purple.

### Swamp milkweed (*A. incarnata*)

**PLANT:** One to many upright branched stems; smooth or with short hairs. **LEAVES:** Opposite; lance-shaped or narrow; with few short hairs. **HABITAT:** Grasslands and ditches, edges of ponds, lakes, streams. **SOILS:** Silty to loamy or clayey; wet-moist, tolerates some mesic. **BLOOM:** Jun-Sep; pink, light purple.

### Plains milkweed (*A. pumila*)

**PLANT:** Upright, unbranched or branched stems; with fine hairs. **LEAVES:** Alternate, may appear whorled; thin and narrow; dense on stems (bottlebrush appearance). **HABITAT:** Prairies, plains, low hills. **SOILS:** Rocky, sandy; dry. **BLOOM:** Jun-Aug; white to greenish white.

### Showy milkweed (*A. speciosa*)

**PLANT:** Stout upright, unbranched stems; hairy. **LEAVES:** Opposite; oval-shaped; hairy. **HABITAT:** Grasslands, old fields, disturbed areas, woodlands, wetlands, edges of rivers, ponds, and irrigation ditches. **SOILS:** Sandy to loamy; dry-moist. **BLOOM:** May-Aug; pink and cream or white; flowers are the largest of American species.

## Most common milkweed species *continued*

### Horsetail milkweed (*A. subverticillata*)



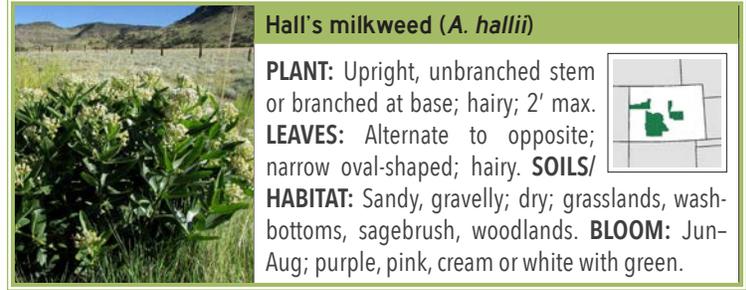
**PLANT:** Upright, branched or unbranched stems; smooth or with fine hairs. **LEAVES:** Whorled; narrow to linear; smooth. **HABITAT:** Ditches, stream edges, disturbed areas. **SOILS:** Sandy; moist. **BLOOM:** May-Aug; yellow to cream or purple tinges.

### Additional Resources:

- ⇒ For more information on monarchs and roadsides, including monitoring, visit: [tinyurl.com/MJV-Monarchs-Roadsides](http://tinyurl.com/MJV-Monarchs-Roadsides)
- ⇒ Western Monarch Milkweed Mapper: [www.monarchmilkweedmapper.org](http://www.monarchmilkweedmapper.org)
- ⇒ Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation: [xerces.org](http://xerces.org)
- ⇒ Monarch Joint Venture: [monarchjointventure.org](http://monarchjointventure.org)

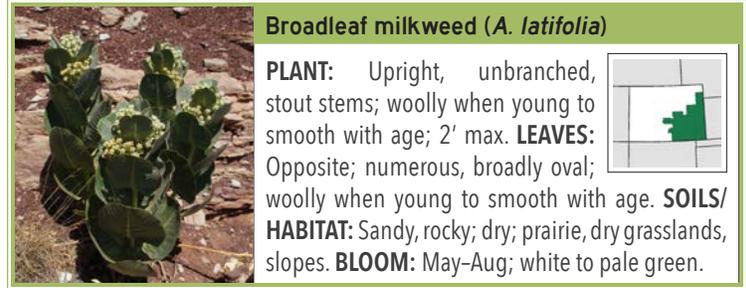
## Less common roadside milkweeds:

### Hall's milkweed (*A. hallii*)



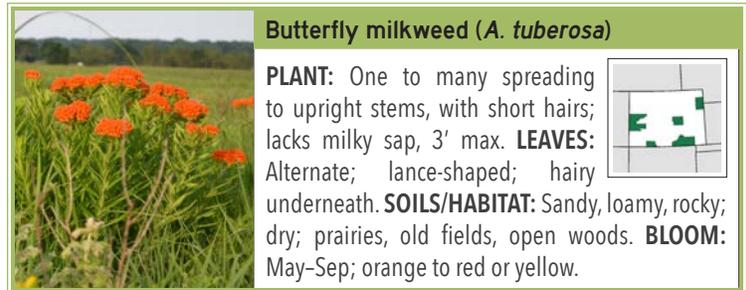
**PLANT:** Upright, unbranched stem or branched at base; hairy; 2' max. **LEAVES:** Alternate to opposite; narrow oval-shaped; hairy. **SOILS/HABITAT:** Sandy, gravelly; dry; grasslands, wash-bottoms, sagebrush, woodlands. **BLOOM:** Jun-Aug; purple, pink, cream or white with green.

### Broadleaf milkweed (*A. latifolia*)



**PLANT:** Upright, unbranched, stout stems; woolly when young to smooth with age; 2' max. **LEAVES:** Opposite; numerous, broadly oval; woolly when young to smooth with age. **SOILS/HABITAT:** Sandy, rocky; dry; prairie, dry grasslands, slopes. **BLOOM:** May-Aug; white to pale green.

### Butterfly milkweed (*A. tuberosa*)



**PLANT:** One to many spreading to upright stems, with short hairs; lacks milky sap, 3' max. **LEAVES:** Alternate; lance-shaped; hairy underneath. **SOILS/HABITAT:** Sandy, loamy, rocky; dry; prairies, old fields, open woods. **BLOOM:** May-Sep; orange to red or yellow.

### Green comet milkweed (*A. viridiflora*)



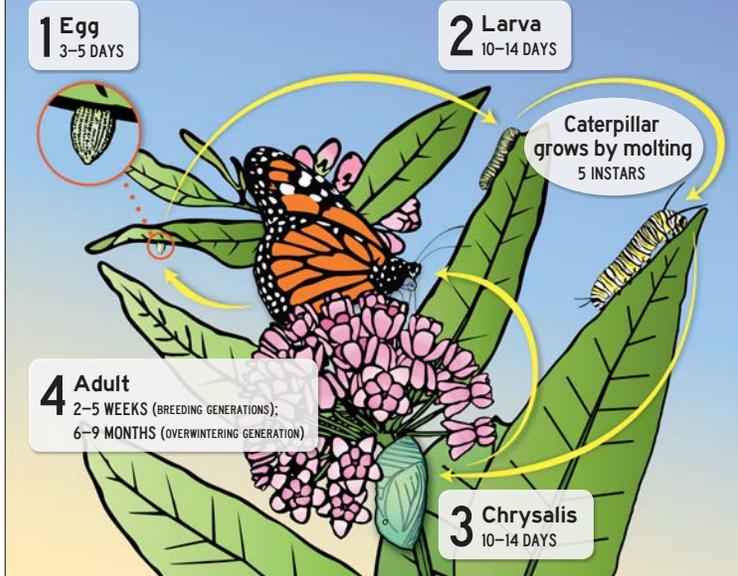
**PLANT:** Unbranched stems, spreading to upright; with short hairs; 3' max. **LEAVES:** Opposite; lance-shaped; with margins folded upward or wavy; with short hairs. **SOILS/HABITAT:** Sandy to loamy or rocky; dry-dry-mesic; prairies, old fields, dunes, forests. **BLOOM:** Jun-Aug; light green to yellowish green.

**Additional milkweeds in Colorado:** *Asclepias arenaria*, *A. cryptoceras*, *A. engelmanniana*, *A. involucrata*, *A. latifolia*, *A. macrotis*, *A. oenotheroides*, *A. rusbyi*, *A. uncialis*.

### Maps & Distribution Data:

These profiles are derived from regional floras and field guides and Woodson's *The North American Species of Asclepias* (1954). Most common species are abundant across the state and are found in roadsides. Less common species might have a limited distribution across the state or may be less common in roadsides. Additional species may be uncommon in roadsides, have a small distribution in the state, or are uncommon or rare. The range maps indicate counties where species have been observed (but may be incomplete), and were created by USDA-NRCS using the latest data from the USDA's PLANTS database (<https://plants.sc.egov.usda.gov>).

## THE MONARCH BUTTERFLY LIFE CYCLE



Multiple generations of monarchs are produced over the spring and summer, with the fall generation migrating to overwintering sites. You can monitor monarchs or milkweeds; see Additional Resources above.

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**PHOTO CREDITS:** Frankie Coburn / SEINet (*A. hallii*); Max Licher / SEINet (*A. subverticillata*, *A. latifolia*); Krista Lundgren, USFWS / flickr (*A. viridiflora*); Tom Potterfield / flickr (*A. incarnata*); Scott Seigfried (*A. tuberosa*); Xerces Society / Stephanie McKnight (*A. speciosa*); Xerces Society / Ray Moran (*A. pumilla*); Andrey Zharkikh / flickr (*A. a. ssp. asperula*). Photographs remain under the copyright of the photographer. © 2019 by The Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation. Xerces® is a trademark registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.