



# MILKWEEDS OF THE GREAT LAKES

MICHIGAN, OHIO, ILLINOIS, INDIANA & WISCONSIN



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.



## The most common milkweeds in roadsides in the Great Lakes Region (in alphabetical order):

### Green milkweed (*A. hirtella*)



**PLANT:** Upright, unbranched stems. **LEAVES:** Alternate; long and narrow; pointed at tips; with short hairs. **HABITAT:** Prairies, meadows, open woods, disturbed areas, railways. **SOILS:** Sandy, rocky to clay; dry-wet. **BLOOM:** Jun-Aug; green with purple or cream.

### 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:** Moist prairies, marshes, ditches, edges of ponds, lakes, streams. **SOILS:** Silty to loamy or clayey; moist-wet, tolerates some mesic. **BLOOM:** Jun-Aug; pink or light purple.

### Common milkweed (*A. syriaca*)



**PLANT:** One to many stout, upright, unbranched stems; usually with short dense hairs. **LEAVES:** Opposite; oval-shaped; hairy underneath. **HABITAT:** Prairies, old fields, railways, open woods, flood plains, disturbed areas. **SOILS:** Sandy to loamy, rocky or clayey; dry-wet. **BLOOM:** May-Aug; light purple or pink.

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



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

## Most common milkweed species *continued*

### Whorled milkweed (*A. verticillata*)



**PLANT:** One to several upright, unbranched stems; with short hairs. **LEAVES:** Whorled; narrow to needle-like; smooth or with short hairs. **HABITAT:** Prairies, open woods, fields, flood plains, glades, railways, disturbed areas. **SOILS:** Sandy, rocky, clayey; dry-mesic. **BLOOM:** May-Sep; white to green.

### Additional Resources:

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

## Less common roadside milkweeds:

### Clasping milkweed (*A. amplexicaulis*)



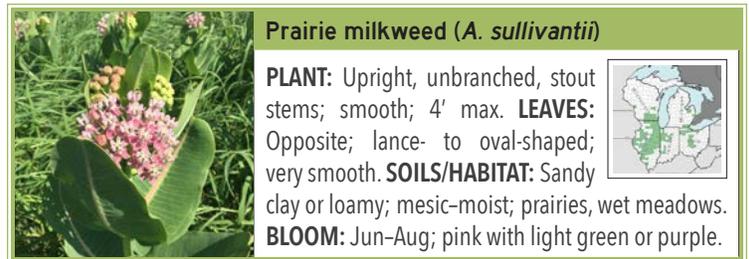
**PLANT:** Upright, unbranched, stems; smooth; 3' max. **LEAVES:** Opposite; oval-shaped; wavy margins; base of leaves clasp stem. **SOILS/HABITAT:** Sandy; dry; grasslands, savannas, woodland edges. **BLOOM:** Apr-Jun; pink or green with cream, sometimes purple.

### Purple milkweed (*A. purpurascens*)



**PLANT:** Upright, unbranched, stout stems; smooth; 6' max. **LEAVES:** Opposite; oval-shaped; smooth above with fine hairs below. **SOILS/HABITAT:** Loamy to clayey; mesic; prairies, meadows, woodland edges, savannas. **BLOOM:** May-Jul; dark rose to purple.

### Prairie milkweed (*A. sullivantii*)



**PLANT:** Upright, unbranched, stout stems; smooth; 4' max. **LEAVES:** Opposite; lance- to oval-shaped; very smooth. **SOILS/HABITAT:** Sandy clay or loamy; mesic-moist; prairies, wet meadows. **BLOOM:** Jun-Aug; pink with light green or purple.

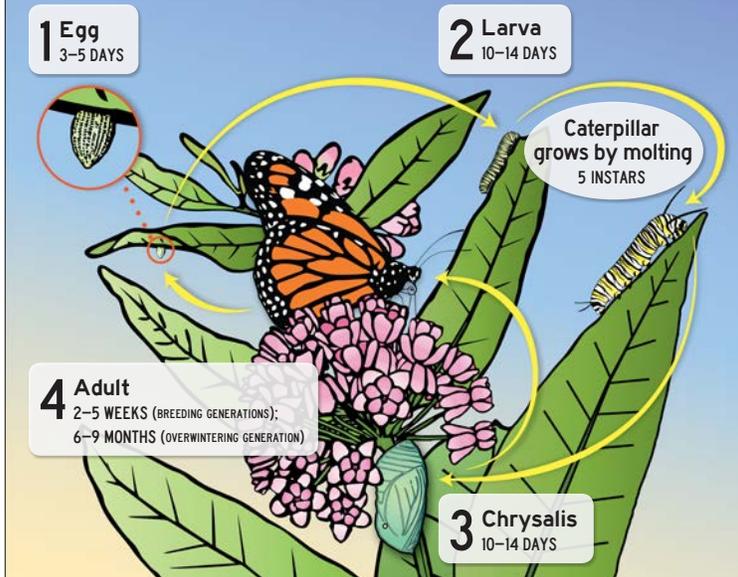
### Green comet milkweed (*A. viridiflora*)



**PLANT:** Multiple unbranched, spreading or upright stems; with short hairs; 3' max. **LEAVES:** Opposite; lance- or oval-shaped, edges folded upward or wavy. **SOILS/HABITAT:** Sandy, rocky; dry; prairies, old fields, dunes, open woods. **BLOOM:** Jun-Jul; light to yellowish green.

**Additional milkweeds in the Great Lakes region:** *Asclepias exaltata*, *A. lanuginosa*, *A. quadrifolia*, *A. ovalifolia*, *A. speciosa*, *A. stenophylla*, *A. variegata*.

## 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.

### 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 states and are found in roadsides. Less common species might not occur in all states, have a limited distribution across a state, or may be less common in roadsides. Additional species may be uncommon in roadsides, have a small distribution in a state or region, 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>).

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**PHOTO CREDITS:** Jim Fowler (*A. syriaca*); Krista Lundgren, USFWS / flickr (*A. viridiflora*); Joshua Mayer / flickr (*A. hirtella*); Jerry Oldenettel / flickr (*A. verticillata*); Tom Potterfield / flickr (*A. incarnata*, *A. purpurascens*); Paul Rothrock / SEINet (*A. amplexicaulis*); Scott Seigfreid (*A. tuberosa*); Xerces Society / Ray Moranz (*A. sullivantii*). 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.