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):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Milkweed</th>
<th>Plant Description</th>
<th>Leaf Description</th>
<th>Habitat</th>
<th>Soil Type</th>
<th>Bloom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Green milkweed (A. hirtella)</td>
<td>Upright, unbranched stems. <strong>LEAVES:</strong> Alternate; long and narrow; pointed at tips; with short hairs. <strong>HABITAT:</strong> Prairies, meadows, open woods, disturbed areas, railways. <strong>SOILS:</strong> Sandy, rocky to clay; dry-wet. <strong>BLOOM:</strong> Jun-Aug; green with purple or cream.</td>
<td>Alternate; long and narrow; pointed at tips; with short hairs.</td>
<td>Prairies, meadows, open woods, disturbed areas, railways.</td>
<td>Sandy, rocky to clay; dry-wet.</td>
<td>Jun-Aug; green with purple or cream.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swamp milkweed (A. incarnata)</td>
<td>One to many upright, branched stems; smooth or with short hairs. <strong>LEAVES:</strong> Opposite; lance-shaped or narrow; with few short hairs. <strong>HABITAT:</strong> Moist prairies, marshes, ditches, edges of ponds, lakes, streams. <strong>SOILS:</strong> Silty to loamy or clayey; moist–wet, tolerates some mesic. <strong>BLOOM:</strong> Jun-Aug; pink or light purple.</td>
<td>Opposite; lance-shaped or narrow; with few short hairs.</td>
<td>Moist prairies, marshes, ditches, edges of ponds, lakes, streams.</td>
<td>Silty to loamy or clayey; moist–wet, tolerates some mesic.</td>
<td>Jun-Aug; pink or light purple.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common milkweed (A. syriaca)</td>
<td>One to many stout, upright, unbranched stems; usually with short dense hairs. <strong>LEAVES:</strong> Alternate; lance-shaped; hairy underneath. <strong>HABITAT:</strong> Prairies, old fields, railways, open woods, flood plains, disturbed areas. <strong>SOILS:</strong> Sandy to loamy, rocky or clayey; dry-wet. <strong>BLOOM:</strong> May-Aug; light purple or pink.</td>
<td>Alternate; lance-shaped; hairy underneath.</td>
<td>Prairies, old fields, railways, open woods, flood plains, disturbed areas.</td>
<td>Sandy to loamy, rocky or clayey; dry-wet.</td>
<td>May-Aug; light purple or pink.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butterfly milkweed (A. tuberosa)</td>
<td>One to many spreading to upright stems; with short hairs; lacks milky sap. <strong>LEAVES:</strong> Alternate; lance-shaped; hairy underneath. <strong>HABITAT:</strong> Prairies, old fields, open woods. <strong>SOILS:</strong> Sandy, loamy, rocky; dry-mesic. <strong>BLOOM:</strong> May–Aug; orange to red or yellow.</td>
<td>Alternate; lance-shaped; hairy underneath.</td>
<td>Prairies, old fields, open woods.</td>
<td>Sandy, loamy, rocky; dry-mesic.</td>
<td>May–Aug; orange to red or yellow.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued on next page.)
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
- Mowing and Monarchs: tinyurl.com/MJV-MowingForMonarchs
- Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation: xerces.org
- Monarch Joint Venture: monarchjointventure.org

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**THE MONARCH BUTTERFLY LIFE CYCLE**

1. **Egg**
   - 3–5 DAYS

2. **Larva**
   - 10–14 DAYS
   - Caterpillar grows by molting 5 INSTARS

3. **Chrysalis**
   - 10–14 DAYS

4. **Adult**
   - 2–5 WEEKS (breeding generations), 6–9 MONTHS (overwintering generation)

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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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.


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 roadways. Less common species might not occur in all states, have a limited distribution across a state, or may be less common in roadways. Additional species may be uncommon in roadways, 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).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: Written by Jennifer Hopwood, Stephanie Frischie, and Karin Jokela (Xerces Society), and Alison Cariveau (Monarch Joint Venture). Reviewed by Dan Zay (Michigan NRCS). Design, header, and monarch life cycle by Sara Morris (Xerces Society). This work was conducted in the National Cooperative Highway Research Program, which is administered by the Transportation Research Board of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine.

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