

School-to-Nature

Milkweed Plant – Common Milkweed



Scientific name: *Asclepias*. Milkweed plants are herbaceous, meaning the plants do not have woody stems. It is a perennial, meaning it re-grows each year. It can grow 2 to 4 feet tall. It is named for the milky liquid that comes out of the stems or leaves when broken. This milky substance was once used to cure warts! The liquid contains chemicals which could be toxic to the heart, and it's very bitter, so it is inedible. Kings Corner has at least 4 other kinds of milkweeds as well as this common variety.

The milkweed plant feeds the caterpillar stage of the monarch butterfly and provides it with shelter. Since the plant is toxic to most animals, eating the plant protects caterpillars from predators. Birds have learned to avoid milkweed caterpillars. Monarchs and many other butterflies also benefit from milkweed leaves and from the flowers' nectar.

Native Americans used half of a milkweed pod, when emptied, as a spoon. It has a long medical history with different tribes: the Omaha and Ponca from Nebraska, the Menomin from Wisconsin and Upper Michigan, and the Dakota from Minnesota. For them, milkweed was used for diarrhea relief, for swelling and rashes, to treat colic, to expel tapeworms, to cure snakebites and as a contraceptive. Different tribes in Africa and South America used different species of milkweed sap to make poisonous arrow tips for hunting.

The Monarch is associated with milkweed, but many insects and butterflies are attracted to its flowers. Milkweed flowers have 5 slits inside, and the feet of the visiting insects such as bees, wasps and butterflies, slip into a slit as they move into the blossom. This slit actually closes over the insect leg, and when the insect wiggles free it pulls out a pollen sac. Unfortunately, if it's a small insect, it may not be able to pull free.

Milkweed produces seeds, called follicles, in an oval, pointed pod. Seeds are arranged in the pods in rows, each attached to a silky white thread. When the pods dry, they open, and the seeds spread with the wind.

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