



# Milkweed for Monarchs

providing sustainable habitat for  
pollinators

## A Natural Pesticide

Ironically (given its reputation as a host plant for pollinators), milkweed can also be used as a pesticide! Its seeds contain cardenolides, a compound that kills nematodes and armyworms. These are destructive pests for crops such as potatoes, soybeans, alfalfa, tomatoes, and corn. In field studies, turning milkweed seed meal into the soil resulted in 97 percent of the pests being killed, and with greater safety for humans and less negative environmental impact to wildlife, soil, and water than when conventional pesticides are employed.



*Asclepias viridis*  
(Green Antelopehorn  
Milkweed plant)



*Asclepias tuberosa*  
(Butterfly Weed)



*Asclepias hirtella*  
(Prairie Milkweed plant)



seed  
pod



Tuberosa  
seed pods



The nectar in all **milkweed** flowers provides valuable food for butterflies, bees, and other pollinators. Butterflies don't only need nectar, but also need food at the caterpillar stage.

**Probably the best-known fact** about milkweed is that it's a host plant for butterflies like the monarch. In reality, although the plants are food for several different species of butterflies (not to mention a source of nectar for moths and hummingbirds), they are the *sole* food source for monarch butterfly larvae. Growing any of the milkweed species in your garden will attract a wonderful array of these creatures. Besides being a great wildlife plant, milkweeds have been used by humans as food and medicine, as textile material, and even

## Milkweed to the Rescue!

Seed floss from milkweed proved to be a valuable tool during the twentieth century. During World War II, the Japanese cut off access to Java, so the U.S. Navy needed to find an alternative to Javanese kapok (a plant tree cultivated for its buoyant seed floss) to fill its life jackets. They found a homegrown solution in milkweed; its seed floss is hollow and coated with a natural plant wax, which makes it waterproof and allows it to float. The federal government paid American schoolchildren 15 cents for every onion bag of unopened milkweed seedpods they collected. Each bag held between 600 to 800 pods, and two bags filled with the pods supplied enough seed floss to fill one life jacket. The navy made 1.2 million life jackets from milkweed seed floss during this time. Interestingly, even though it repels water, milkweed floss actually absorbs oil. Because of this helpful trait, the seed floss is currently used to make floating kits that help clean up man-made oil

