

THE FIELD & FOREST GUIDE

TO GROWING AND HARVESTING WILD FOODS

CHAPTER 14

MILKWEED



Asclepias syriaca

This perennial herb grows prolifically along roads and in open fields. Several parts of the plant provide excellent edibles and a range of great tastes. Young shoots cooked like asparagus, fresh leaves like spinach, small buds taste like broccoli, young pods can be stuffed and baked, the nectar can be dried to make sugar. An important medicinal with many practical uses.

DESCRIPTION & HABITAT

Milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*)

Asclepiadaceae (Milkweed Family)

Perennial Herb

Common Names: Algodoncillo, Broadleaf Milkweed, Butterfly Milkweed, Common Milkweed, Herbe à la ouate, Seidenpflanze, Silkweed, Silky Swallowwort, Virginia-silk

Natural Habitat: North America, Europe, and Asia. Found in most any open sunny area, along roads and railways, in dry fields, thickets, waste areas and vacant city lots, in sandy, clay, or rocky calcareous soils. Grows along the banks or flood plains of lakes, ponds, and waterways, in prairies and forest margins, and dry stream beds.

Characteristics: Common Milkweed is a perennial mucilaginous 'wild green' herb that grows from deep, widespread rhizomes. The hairy stems are usually solitary from a simple to a branched and thickened base, and grow from 3 to 6.5 ft. tall. Stems are gray-woolly throughout, with milky latex sap.

The opposite leaves have broadly ovate to elliptic blades that are 4 to 8 inches long and 2 to 4.5 inches wide. The leaves are transversely veined, slightly hairy above and densely hairy below, and the petiole is up to $\frac{3}{4}$ inch long. Like the stems, when the leaves are crushed they bleed a white milky juice.

The inflorescence occurs in the upper leaf axils, with several umbels with peduncles 3-8 cm. long and pedicels 1-3 cm. long. *A. syriaca* produces its inflorescence by a bifurcation of the shoot apex. One part of the bifurcation continues on as vegetative growth, while the other becomes a flower head. There are 20 to 130 flowers per bloom. The flowers are small, 0.4 to 0.7 inch. The five petals are green to purple-tinged and are topped by a crown of five erect lobes that are rose or mauve to purple, and rarely white. They bloom from May to August, and the flowers have a strong and very pleasant aroma.

The fruits are spindle-shaped follicles covered with soft hairs. The small, round, hairy seeds are 6-8 mm (0.2-0.3 inch) in diameter. The flattened seeds are warty and rough. Milkweed produces its seeds within rough surfaced pods, called follicles, each of which has a single carpel and splits open along a single line. Seeds are produced from August to November.

Common Milkweed is perhaps best known for its large, flat, brown seeds, which are released in great numbers as the pods burst open. Like cattails, some of the seeds are distributed in the fluff, which floats on the breeze.

Background: The milkweed plant has often been cursed by farmers because it colonizes in pastures. While usually ignored by sheep and cattle, livestock have been known to die from eating it. While it's often considered a noxious weed due because of its intrusive impact on crops, the Monarch caterpillars rely on it as an essential foodstuff, making Milkweed a much-loved plant amongst butterfly lovers. In fact, the Monarch's entire lifecycle typically involves the Milkweed plant.

The cardiac glycoside found in Milkweed serves as a chemical defense for Monarch butterflies, by making the caterpillar's flesh distasteful to most predators. Monarch butterflies are specific to Milkweed plants, as Milkweed is the only type of plant on which the eggs are laid and the larvae will feed and mature into a chrysalis. Eggs are laid on the fuzzy underside of young leaves. The added benefit of having beautiful Monarch butterflies in the garden make Milkweed an excellent landscaping plant.



IDENTIFICATION GUIDE



Clockwise from top left: Milkweed seeds, seedlings, leaf, dried pod with seeds, seeds in fluff, mature blooms, single floret, immature buds, and (center) cluster of seed pods

PROPAGATION & CULTIVATION

Propagation: Milkweed loves sunlight, dry conditions, and loamy or sandy soils, but will grow in all types of soils as well as in somewhat moist habitats. *A. syriaca* is propagated by seed as well as by buds on the root rhizomes, and its self-propagates by way of its underground shoots, sometimes in a very invasive fashion.

Propagation by cuttings of the rhizome is very easy and reliable. Cuttings should be taken when the plant is dormant. Each piece of the rhizome must have at least one bud (the buds are about two inches apart). Timing of propagation is very important. Harvest or divide your plants and get the plants into the ground by late fall, so they have time to develop enough root ball to survive the winter. Irrigation the first year will improve survival, and by the second year the root system should be established enough for the plants will survive on their own.

To propagate Milkweed by seed, wait for the pods to ripen, but harvest the seed before the pods slip open. Cultivate the soil to a fine tilth, eliminating the weeds and stones. Firm the soil by treading, and lightly rake it. Sow the seeds directly in the prepared bed in the fall of the year.

If planting indoors in flats or in a greenhouse, the seeds should first be cold-treated for three months. Milkweed seeds are vigorously viable, and store for many years.

Both seedlings and cuttings usually bloom in their second year, although cuttings will sometimes bloom in the first year. During the first summer, keep the patch weeded and water as needed, until the colony grows big enough to provide its own cover, helping moisture retention.

Milkweed patches can be burned in the fall, after seed and foodstuffs are harvested. This removes dead stalks and stimulates new growth. The new plants after a burn tend to grow taller, with straighter stems and thus longer fibers. Flower and seed production will also be stimulated.

Harvesting: There are various stages of the Milkweed's growth cycle when you can harvest nice foodstuffs: when the first shoots emerge in spring; when the flowers begin to bud in early summer, when the flowers are in full bloom, and when the seed pods first appear.

When harvesting Milkweed in bloom, there will be several flowers on the plant. The best plants to harvest are those with flowers in bloom as well as unopened buds. If all the flowers are already spent, don't take this plant for foodstuffs, but instead harvest seeds or root cuttings later in the fall.

Snip the stalk just below the lowest usable flower. These young greens can be prepared in a number of nice dishes. The older leaves are too tough, so don't take the leaves below the usable flowers.

Milkweed's unopened flowers have a resemblance to broccoli, both raw and cooked. These can be prepared in the same manner as the leaves, and have a similar taste, with a slight sweetness. The texture of buds make them very pleasing to eat.

The flower blooms of Milkweed are perhaps its most desirable part as an edible. The flowers contain little of the milky sap, so they require little special preparation. The flowers can be parboiled or lightly steamed for a few minutes, then rinsed in cold water before being used.

To select the best pods, choose the smallest and firmest, under two inch in length. The larger pods are also edible, as long as the seeds and silk are still moist and white. Break a few open to be certain that the inside has not become fibrous.

Look-Alikes: In the early spring, the shoots of *A. syriaca* look nearly identical to Dogbane (*Apocynum cannabinum*), which is a poisonous plant. As the plants mature, they are easily distinguished. The most distinguishing feature is the leaves; Dogbane's leaves come to a sharper point, while Milkweed's leaves have more wave, or curl.



PREPARATION & COOKING

While many have their favorite, all parts of the Common Milkweed are edible: the emergent shoots, young stems, young leaves, flower buds, flower blooms, unripe seeds pods, mature pods, nectar, seeds, roots, and even the milky latex sap. The tender shoots, flower buds and young pods all have a flavor similar to fresh peas or beans, but have their own unique textures.

As is usually the case, the younger and more tender the shoots, stems, leaves or pods, the more palatable they are. Mature stems and leaves have the greatest amount of milky sap, and are not so palatable. The strong sap can also cause a rash on sensitive people.

When cooking Milkweed greens, the general rule of thumb is that they should be boiled to remove the bitterness in the milky sap. Always immerse the plant parts in already boiling water; putting them in cold water then bringing it to a boil just 'sets' the bitterness. It's more effective to 'shock' the bitterness out in boiling water. Boil for a few minutes then change the water. Bring fresh water to a boil, return the plants to the water, and boil for a few more minutes, up to a total of 7 to 10 minutes. Now the Milkweed can be used like any other greens, in soups, casseroles, or as a side dish, with a little butter or olive oil.

SHOOTS:

Milkweed shoots can be harvested when they are very small as possible, ideally no more than 2-3 inches tall. Young spring shoots can be cooked and served like asparagus, with a light butter and lemon sauce or a tarragon cream. The Milkweed has a lovely flavor, slightly sweeter than asparagus.

Rub the wool off young shoots and eat them raw, or steam, boil, stir-fry or bake them. Taller shoots will be more bitter, and have to be boiled to remove the sap. They're excellent pureed and whipped into mashed potatoes.

LEAVES:

The young, just opened leaves are excellent, and can be prepared just like spinach, after initial boiling to remove bitterness. They have a lovely sweet flavor. The leaves are good as soup greens, and can also be used to roll-up stuffing, like a cabbage or grape leaf.

FLOWER BUDS:

In late spring or early summer, the budding flower spikes look very much like broccoli. These unopened flower buds can be steamed and prepared just like broccoli, and have a lovely sweet, nutty flavor, like pesto. They're excellent mixed into savory rice dishes, added to stir-fry's at the last minute, or gently folded into dumpling batter and cooked in a soup or stew.

FLOWER BLOOMS:

Milkweed flowers are not only wonderful to smell, but have a natural sweetness. Harvest them early in the morning, when still tipped in dew. Wash gently to remove any little travelers, and cook them down in boiling water to make a sugary syrup. You can begin with a sugar water base or, if you have an abundance of flowers, make a reduced syrup from the flowers alone.

The flower syrup can be used as a flavoring in many dishes, and can be added as a thickener in soups and stews. Open flowers don't have to be parboiled, but you can parboil them for one minute if you like, especially if using mature blooms.

Milkweed flower fritters are an exceptional treat, tasty and beautiful. Parboil for one minute to tenderize, then coat in a fritter or pancake batter, and fry in light oil or ghee.

PODS:

Young Milkweed pods have an excellent flavor, and are versatile vegetables. Called "little pigs" in Quebec, the plump little pods should be picked shortly after they appear, when they're at the height of tenderness. They often appear in mid- to late July. Older pods are also good to eat, but have to be boiled a bit longer to remove the sap bitterness and fiber.

Pods can be prepared in many ways. Once boiled, they can be sautéed, stir-fried, steamed or boiled, diced and fried, or baked. Split them open, de-seed and stuff with minced vegetables, rice and cheese, or other stuffing. The stuffed pods can be fried, baked, or eaten raw, as hors d'oeuvres.

Euell Gibbons emphasized that the pods should be placed only in boiling water to remove the bitterness; placing them in a pot of cold water only fixes the bitter flavor. Sautéing them over medium heat also removes the pods, and eliminates the need to boil.

The immature seeds and white interior fluff in the young pods is also a nice edible. It can be scooped out and mixed together with other minced vegetables or cheeses, then sautéed. This mixture can be stuffed back into parboiled pods, then baked, or just blend the mixture into cooked rice, potatoes, or pasta.

Instead of de-seeding them, the young pods can also be charcoal roasted or cooked like a hotdog on a stick, over hot coals. The outside blackens while it cooks, and can then be split open to reveal the lovely interior meat of the pod. Add a bit of butter and salt or pepper, and enjoy this natural delight.

NECTAR:

The Milkweed's nectar is another rare delight, as many bees and insects know. It can be collected by the patient forager and dried to make an exceptionally flavorful sugar. To harvest the pollen, one has to very carefully inspect the interior of the flowers, where the tiny pollen sacs are found. An eyeglass can be very helpful in this task (especially if you're my age.)

The tiny pollen sacs, known as *pollinia*, are buried within the other flora organs, which need to be dissecting to reveal them. Insects crawl amongst the flower's organs to feed, and the pollen sticks to their feet and appendages. It is then carried on to the next flower, as pollination takes place.

SEEDS:

The seeds of Milkweed are also edible. They can be lightly toasted and used whole or chopped, mixed into soups or baked goods, mixed into granola, or lightly salted and eaten as a snack.

ROOTS:

Native Americans ate the roots of Milkweed as a vegetable, boiling and baking them like any root vegetable.

MILKY SAP:

Native Americans also ate the milky sap of the Milkweed, which eaten alone, does not have an unpleasant flavor. The dried latex was chewed, both for its nutritive and medicinal value. It helped to curb hunger and kept the mouth moist when water was in short supply.

FEATURED RECIPES

ROASTED MILKWEED SHOOTS

Ingredients:

1 lb. of fresh Milkweed shoots
2 Tblsp. olive oil
1 small Fennel bulb
a handful fresh herbs
1 lemon
salt and pepper to taste

Preparation:

Rinse and clean the shoots. Lay on a cookie sheet or foil-covered pan. Brush on olive oil. Feel and dice the Fennel, and parboil or sauté for a few minutes, until half-cooked. Sprinkle into pan with the shoots. Finely mince the herbs and sprinkle ovetop along with salt and pepper.

Bake in a pre-heated oven at 400°F. for 8 to 10 minutes, until lightly browned and tender. Spritz with a little lemon juice and serve, as a side-dish or on top of pasta.

Variation: You can prepare Milkweed pods exactly the same way, halving and de-seeding the pods first.



MILKWEED FRITTERS

Ingredients:

20 Milkweed blossoms
1 cup of flour
1 tsp. baking powder
½ tsp. salt
1 cup of milk
1 Tbsp. buttermilk
¼ cup safflower or light oil

Preparation:

Make your batter medium thin, so it can get into all the little flower crevices. Dip the clean flowers into batter and place on a hot skillet or drop into a wok of hot oil. Flip over and fry to golden brown on all sides. Remove and drain on a paper towel. Dust with powdered sugar and serve immediately. If you like, squeeze a bit of orange or lemon juice over the fritter, or dust with cinnamon or powdered sugar.



STEAMED MILKWEED 'BROCCOLI'

Ingredients:

1 lb. of fresh Milkweed 'broccoli' buds, unopened
salted water for boiling

Preparation:

Pick the young Milkweed buds while they're still green and tightly closed. Rinse well in salted water, then in clear water. Bring a pot of water to boil, add the buds, and boil for a few minutes. Remove, put fresh water in the pot and return to a boil, then place the buds in again, to boil for another few minutes, until tender.

Eat just as they are, with olive oil or butter and a little salt and pepper. Or, drizzle them with sesame oil, a honey-mustard vinaigrette, or your favorite dressing.



FRIED MILKWEED BALLS

Ingredients:

12 young Milkweed pods
4 medium potatoes
2 heads fresh spinach
2 small green chilis
1/2 teaspoon dry red chilis
1 cup besan (chickpea) flour
salt to taste
oil for frying

Preparation:

Boil the Milkweed pods to remove bitterness, as described above, and boil until completely soft. Boil the potatoes and drain. Mash together the potatoes and Milkweed. Steam the spinach, squeeze out all the water, and mix into the mash. Mix all the remaining ingredients together (except the oil), and form into balls. The consistency should be sticky enough so the balls will hold together well. Add scant oil if needed.

Make the balls about 2 inches diameter. Deep fry in oil until golden, drain, and serve with a little sour cream on the side, or other dipping sauce. You can substitute the chickpea flour with ½ whole wheat flour, ½ Bisquick.



MILKWEED AU GRATIN

Ingredients:

4 cups Milkweed buds
4 Tblsp. butter
3 Tblsp. flour
1½ cups milk
1 cup grated cheese (a little sharp)
salt and pepper to taste
fresh grated nutmeg

Preparation:

Prepare Milkweed buds by immersing in boiling water for 1 minute, then strain. Put the buds in a buttered casserole dish. In a skillet, melt butter and stir in flour, salt and pepper. Whisk to a fine roux and brown for a minute. Gradually whisk in the milk, cooking and stirring until the roux is thick and smooth. Pour the roux over the Milkweed and top with grated cheese and nutmeg. Bake at 375° F for 15 minutes, then place under the broiler for a minute or two bring the top to a golden brown.

MILKWEED SYRUP

Ingredients:

6 cups of fully opened Milkweed blossoms
8 cups water
4 cups sugar

Preparation:

Gently snip and remove the blossoms from the stem. Rinse and tie-up loosely in cheesecloth.

Bring the water and sugar to a boil, and add the bag of blossoms. Reduce the heat, and allow mixture to simmer actively until the syrup is reduced by about half. Remove from the heat. When cooled, remove the bag of Milkweed and allow it to drain into the pot. Gently squeeze between wood spoons to expel as much flavor as possible into the syrup.

Place in a sterilized jar, covered tightly, and store in the refrigerator. Keeps well for several weeks. Serve this flavorful, tangy syrup on pancakes, over ice cream, as a fruit salad dressing, mixed into batters, or in beverages.



MILKWEED PICKLES

Ingredients:

4 cups young Milkweed pods
cider vinegar
pickling spices of your choice

Preparation:

Use small, tender pods, up to 2 inches long. Make pickling brine with the spices and vinegar, letting it simmer to release all the spice flavors. You can use the same spice mix you would for dill pickles, or for sweet bread & butter pickles – both are excellent with Milkweed.

Boil the pods as described above, to remove any bitterness. Put the pods into jars and cover with hot brine, work out the air bubbles. Put into sterilized jars and process in a water bath canner at a rolling boil for 15 minutes. Let the pickles sit for 2 weeks to fully season before serving.



MILKWEED POD KETCHUP

Ingredients:

6 large, ripe tomatoes
12 tender Milkweed pods
1 tart apple, peeled
1 green or red bell pepper
2 tsp. brown sugar
cider vinegar
2 tsp. allspice
1/2 tsp. mustard powder
1/2 tsp. ground cloves

Preparation:

Finely chop the tomatoes and peppers. Boil the Milkweed pods, as described above to remove bitterness. Finely chop the apple. Mix all the ingredients together and cook on a medium simmer until everything breaks down. Use just enough vinegar to create the necessary moisture. Stir frequently to keep from sticking to pan. Put into sterilized jars, seal, and refrigerate. For long-term storage, process in a water bath canner at a rolling boil for 15 minutes.



MEDICINAL & OTHER USES

Common Milkweed has been used for centuries as an effective and potent medicinal. The Cherokee drank an infusion of Milkweed root and Virgin's Bower (a *Clematis* species) for backaches. The Cherokee, Iroquois, and Rappahannock used the sap to remove warts, for ringworm, and for bee stings. The Cherokee used the plant as a laxative, an antidote for gravel and dropsy, and an infusion was given for mastitis. They also took an infusion of the root for venereal diseases.

The Chippewa made a cold decoction of the root and added it to food to produce postpartum milk flow. The Iroquois took an infusion of the leaves for stomach medicine. A compound decoction of plants was taken to prevent hemorrhage after childbirth by the Iroquois. The Menominee ate the buds or a decoction of the root for chest discomfort. The Ojibwa used the root as a female remedy, and the Potawatomi used the root for various ailments.

A root decoction (either fresh or dried) is used to strengthen the heart, working in a way different than Digitalis, and without the Foxglove derivative's toxicity. It helps relieve edema, probably by strengthening the heart.

The root is emetic and cathartic in large doses. The root decoction also soothes the nerves and is used as an anthelmintic to kill worms, and as a stomach tonic. It's acts as a diaphoretic and expectorant and is used for coughs, colds, arthritis aggravated by the cold, inflammation of the lungs and thorax, asthma, bronchitis, female disorders, diarrhea and gastric mucus, as well as for afflictions of the urinary tract.

Milkweed tea is used as a laxative and a diuretic for kidney stones, and to help pass gallstones. Many older people use the milky sap of Milkweed for joint pain, swelling and arthritis. Mix the milky substance with a little water, so it's palatable. Drink ½ cup per day. The milky sap is also used topically, fresh or dried, to reduce warts.

The Milkweed species as a group are known to contain cardiac glycosides, which can be poisonous to humans and livestock, as well as other substances that may account for their excellent medicinal effect. Resinoids, glycosides, and a small amount of alkaloids are present in all parts of the plant. Symptoms of poisoning by the cardiac glycosides include dullness, weakness, bloating, inability to stand or walk, high body temperature, rapid and weak pulse, difficulty breathing, dilated pupils, spasms, and coma.

OTHER USES:

In addition to all the excellent ways Milkweed can be used as a foodstuff and medicinal, the plant has a host of other useful qualities. The strong, silky fibers, or bast, contained just under the outer skin of the stems makes a beautiful paper fiber. The seed fluff is often added to paper as a decorative element.

Milkweed fibers are of excellent quality, and can be spun with other fibers and materials, like hemp, to make twine. The tough fibers are great for making cords and ropes, and for weaving coarse cloth. Milkweed stems are collected after the stalks begin to die down in the late fall, early winter. If the milkweed stems will break off at the ground it's time to harvest. Breaking off the stalks also encourages re-sprouting in the spring. The dried stalks are split open to release the fiber.

The stalk's outer covering is removed and the fibers released by first rubbing between the hands, and then drawing the fibers over a hard surface. Twist the fibers opposite each other and twine them together to form cord. This can also be accomplished by rolling the fibers on your thigh while twisting them together.

Milkweed flowers are often dried and used in wreaths or for making potpourri. The dried pods are also excellent for soaking up insecticides, then being placed in effective spots around the homestead.

The milky substance of this plant is actually a form of latex, and can be gathered and used as a rough form of rubber. Allowed to slightly dry and coagulate, while kept at a smooth consistency, the latex can be brushed or spread on like caulking.

The fluff from Milkweed's mature seed pods is an excellent material for use as stuffing in clothing, bedding and furniture. Mixed in with goose down, the fluff is an excellent lightweight insulator. The chemical properties of Milkweed give the fluff a natural allergenic property, which can be helpful for those with allergies.

