

Swamp Milkweed

Asclepias incarnata L.

Growth Habit and Diagnostic Characteristics

Swamp milkweed is a tall, up to 1.5m (5.0 feet), perennial with opposite lance-shaped leaves, frequently found in freshwater wetlands. Leaves, 7.5 to 12.5 cm (3 to 5 in.) long, are profuse throughout the upper two thirds of the stem. Flowers are borne collectively in relatively compact umbrella-like (umbells) flower clusters (inflorescence). Flowers (pink to rose-purple) bloom from mid-summer to late August. Each flower has a specialized morphology (illustrated) so unique that cross-pollination is affected via nectar-seeking butterflies. The pollen is concentrated in minute waxey masses called pollinia resembling two sacks attached to each other, in 'saddle bag' fashion, by a thread-like filament called a translator. Each pollinium is carried from one flower via spurs of the butterfly's leg to another flower where it must be precisely inserted to ensure pollination. The monarch butterfly is apparently the primary pollinator of swamp milkweed.

The pollination mechanism is infrequently fulfilled since milkweed plants produce few fruits late in the season. Fruits that do develop are robust pods (illustrated), botanically known as follicles. Inside the follicles are many seeds with silky hairs resembling kapok. When seeds are released, in late fall, they are widely distributed by wind.

Distribution

Asclepias incarnata ranges throughout the eastern half of North America in mesic and wetland areas.

Habitat

Swamp milkweed occurs in wet and saturated habitats in Virginia, ranging from ditches, tidal and nontidal freshwater marshes, edges of ponds or lakes, and on the margins of wooded swamps. *Asclepias incarnata* is seldom a major component of a wetland plant community, as it usually grows as a solitary plant and not in dense clusters. Another milkweed, infrequently encountered in Virginia's coastal wetlands, is few-flowered milkweed (*Asclepias lanceolata*). This rather rare milkweed has only several bright, multicolored (orange, red and yellow) flowers and narrow linear-shaped leaves.

In freshwater marshes, swamp milkweed may be associated with tearthumbs (*Wetland Flora*, March 1992) and smartweeds (*Polygonum* spp.), swamp dock (*Rumex verticillata*), rice cutgrass (*Leersia oryoides*) and others.

Ecological Values/Benefits

Perhaps the most significant specific value of this plant is that it is a major nectar source for the monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*). The caterpillar stage of the monarch also feeds on milkweeds.

Hydrophytic Factor/Benefits

According to the *National List of Plant Species that Occur in Wetlands: Virginia* (1988), *Asclepias incarnata* is classified as an **obligate wetland plant (OBL)**. OBL plants almost always occur in wetlands (99%) under natural conditions.

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