

BWSR Featured Plant

Name: Whorled Milkweed (*Asclepias verticillata*)

Plant Family: Dogbane (Apocynaceae)

Statewide Wetland Indicator Status:

- GP: FACU
- MW: FACU
- NCNE: UPL



Whorled Milkweed flowers
Image by Katy Chayka of Minnesota Wildflowers

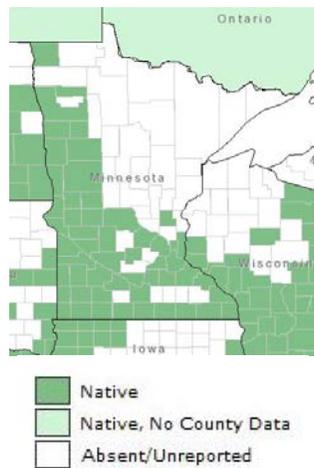
Named for its leaves that are “whorled” along the stem, Whorled Milkweed is an important perennial herbaceous plant for pollinators, particularly for the larvae of monarch butterflies. The nectar of the flowers also attracts other insects, including long-tongued bees, short-tongued bees, wasps, flies, butterflies, skippers, and beetles. Flowers bloom later in the summer, typically in August to September. Whorled Milkweed is unpalatable to both deer and rabbits and is a resilient plant that can grow in roadsides and pastures.

Identification

Stems are upright and lined with fine hairs. Abundant leaves are densely packed in whorls of three to six leaves located at the nodes of the stem. Leaves are 1/8 inch wide, two to three inches long, and smooth. One to four umbels of white flowers are produced on short flowering stalks (peduncles) in summer. Each umbel is about one inch across and contains ten to twenty flowers. The flowers have five petals, and are white to light green. Three to four inch pods form in late summer, containing flat brown seeds with white tufts of hair.



Whorled Milkweed seed pods (top)
Leaves of Whorled Milkweed (bottom)
Images by Katy Chayka of Minnesota Wildflowers



Range

Whorled Milkweed is typically found in open disturbed prairies, dry slopes, woodland openings, pastures, fields, and roadsides in a large part of central and eastern North America. In Minnesota it is found in western, central, and southern prairies.

Range based on University of MN Herbarium data

Uses

As with other native milkweeds, many insects utilize the nectar of Whorled Milkweed including long-tongued bees, short-tongued bees, wasps, flies, butterflies, skippers, and beetles. It is an important larval food source for monarch butterflies that exclusively feed on milkweed species. As one of the more toxic milkweed species, it is not eaten by mammalian herbivores.

Whorled Milkweed can be used for natural pest control on the edges of gardens as it attracts spiders and beetles that prey on unwanted insects.

Primary Uses:

- Pollinator nectar source
- Monarch larvae food source
- Restored prairie plantings



Community of plants
Image by Katy Chayka of Minnesota

Planting Recommendations

Whorled Milkweed is rhizomatous and will spread to form dense colonies. It establishes well from seeds that can be harvested from pods once they are brown and dry in early fall. The seeds should be planted in late fall so they can break dormancy over winter. Clumps within native gardens or conservation plantings can also be separated and transplanted in fall or early spring. The plants prefer full to partial sun and medium wet to dry soil.

Planting Methods

- Seed
- Containerized plants
- Transplanting

Similar Species

Butterfly Milkweed, or Butterflyweed, (*Asclepias tuberosa*) is another important milkweed for Minnesota pollinators, found mostly the eastern



Butterfly Milkweed

to central parts of the state. During the blooming season in middle to late summer, Butterfly Milkweed can be differentiated by its distinctly orange flowers. During the fall, seed pods are also long and slender. Alternate or opposite leaves are two to six inches long and wider than those of Whorled Milkweed.

Bastard Toadflax (*Comandra umbellata*), is also found in dry prairies across Minnesota, blooming in May to July. Its white to pinkish flowers are 1/8 to 1/4 inch across and found at the top of an erect, smooth stem. The leaves are alternate, 1/2 to two inches long, and narrow (1/8 to 3/4 inch across). Instead of a seed pod, the fruit of Bastard Toadflax is a round drupe that turns blue to brown and each contain one large seed.



Bastard Toadflax
Image by Katy Chayka of Minnesota Wildflowers

References

www.friendsofthewildflowergarden.org/, <http://grownative.org>, <http://www.illinoiswildflowers.info>, <https://www.minnesotawildflowers.info>, <http://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/>, <https://plants.usda.gov>, <https://www.prairiemoon.com/>

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