

BWSR Featured Plant

Name: Prairie Milk Vetch (*Astragalus adsurgens*)

Also called: Standing Milk-vetch, Lavender Milk-vetch

Plant Family: Fabaceae (Pea)

Statewide Wetland
Indicator Status:

- UPL



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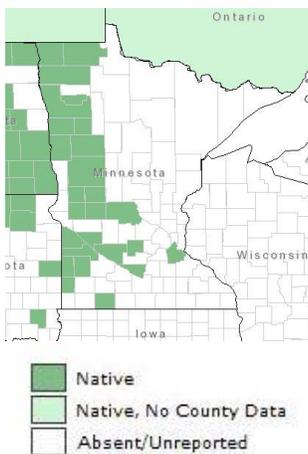
Prairie Milk Vetch Image by Peter M. Dziuk of Minnesota Wildflowers

Prairie Milk Vetch is a flowering perennial herb of the pea (legume or bean) family, one of the three largest families of terrestrial plants. A native plant to Minnesota, it is found mostly on the western half of the state. It blooms in June and July where it prefers full sun in open grasslands and dry prairies.

Identification

Plants are typically around one-foot tall but can grow up to sixteen inches. The plants have many stems and can spread up to two feet across from a center crown. The stems can vary from being erect to lying on the ground. Compound leaves are attached alternately in groups of thirteen to

twenty-one. Each leaf is about three inches long with individual leaflets up to one inch long. The lavender to bluish flowers are grouped in round clusters about one inch wide and up to two inches tall. Each flower is held by a light green calyx that will form a hairy pod (legume).



Range based on University of MN Herbarium data

Range

Prairie Milk Vetch is found in the U.S. from Washington to Minnesota and as far south as New Mexico, where it can be found at elevations up to 11,000 feet. It is found in every province in Canada. A variety of *A. adsurgens* called Standing Milk-vetch is found in China and Mongolia. The western variety found here (also called *Astragalus laxmannii*; var. *robustior*) prefers dry, open areas in prairies, grasslands, and pastures.



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Leaves and stems of Prairie Milk Vetch Image by Peter M. Dziuk of Minnesota Wildflowers

Uses

The showy flowers and early blooming season of Prairie Milk Vetch make it popular among pollinators, including bumblebees, honeybees, butterflies, and birds. They are a food source of the larvae of some butterflies and moths. While there is a lack of studies looking at the human benefits of *Astragalus* species, members of *Astragalus* have been used in Chinese medicine for a variety of conditions.

Primary Uses:

- Pollinator nectar source
- Butterfly/moth larval food source
- Restored prairie plantings



Community of plants
Image by Peter M. Dziuk of Minnesota
Wildflowers

Planting Recommendations

Prairie Milk Vetch seeds are not readily available in Minnesota for purchase, but can be harvested from mature plants when pods have dried. Seeds require scarification, which can be done by rubbing the seeds between pieces of sandpaper to scratch the seed surface. Seeds should be planted in fall to allow for cold-moist periods that lead to germination in the spring. Legume family plants are able to fix atmospheric nitrogen in the soil due to a symbiotic relationship with rhizobia bacteria that live in nodules along the roots. If planting from seed, seeds must be inoculated with a genus specific inoculum at the time of planting. Check with your seed provider to supply this inoculum if desired.

Planting Methods

- Seed

Similar Species

Canada Milk Vetch (*Astragalus canadensis*) is more common than Prairie Milk Vetch in Minnesota and found all across the state. The flower clusters are longer, up to six inches, and are white to yellow-green in color. Leaflets have an elliptical shape and are wider, at least ½ inch wide and one and ¼ inch long. Fruit of Canada Milk Vetch is smooth compared to the hairy pods of Prairie Milk Vetch.



Ground Plum
Image by Peter M. Dziuk of Minnesota
Wildflowers

Ground Plum (*Astragalus crassicaarpus*) can also resemble Prairie Milk Vetch, however the purplish flowers do not cluster as tightly and are individually ¾ inch long with two smaller lower petals. Leaflets are much smaller, up to ½ inch long and less than ¼ inch wide, in groups of 15-29. Once the plant fruits, the purple to reddish-purple plum-like pods are distinctive.



Canada Milk Vetch leaves

References

<https://www.minnesotawildflowers.info>, <https://nccih.nih.gov/health/astragalus>, <https://www.npwrc.usgs.gov/>, <https://plants.usda.gov>, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Astragalus>

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