Weed focus: Milkweed

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Common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca* L.) is a native, warm-season perennial plant that is a member of a large family (115 species) that grows across the Americas. It is frequently found along fence rows, on roadsides, and in rangeland and pastures. If given opportunity, it can become established in thin lawns. It tolerates both full sun and shade but prefers light.

Milkweed plants grow up to 5 feet tall and tend to form clusters of thick, stout stalks (right). It spreads by rhizomes and quickly forms colonies (below). Leaves are usually about 6 inches in length and 2 to 3 inches across. The top leaf surface is darker than the bottom surface, which can have thick, whitish fuzz. Broken leaves or stems exude a thick, white sap, which resembles milk, and this is how the plant derived its name (below, right).



Milkweed flowers tend to be toward the top of the plant. They are globe-shaped clusters of pinkish to lavender flowers. They have a strong, sweet scent and are a huge favorite of pollinators, especially butterflies (next page, top left). The monarch butterfly (next page, top right) prefers to lay its eggs on the common milkweed plant. Larvae eat the leaves of the plant as their sole food source. Toxins from the sap make these brightly colored caterpillars toxic to predators and so confer a certain amount of protection.











Milkweed can be confused with hemp dogbane, especially when it is young. Both species have white sap, however, hemp dogbane has smaller, smooth leaves and becomes a branched plant (below, left).





Milkweed seeds are produced in pods which are green until the seeds inside

are mature. When seeds are ready for dispersal, the pods dry and crack open to release the seeds on fluffy, white parachutes (above, right).

Milkweed leaves and other above-ground parts contain cardenolides (cardiac glycosides) that can be toxic to livestock. Poisoning is rarely a problem, since livestock tend to avoid consuming milkweed species, and they are able to tolerate small quantities of the toxin with no ill effects; however, if hungry livestock are turned into infested paddocks with inadequate alternative forages, toxicity can result. The glycosides impact heart function, resulting in rapid or weak pulse, staggering, dilation of pupils, and other symptoms. Veterinary intervention can prevent death if the risk or symptoms of poisoning are detected shortly after ingestion.

<u>Controlling milkweed in pastures</u>: Once established and in a large colony, milkweed can present a challenge. Grazing livestock will trample the plants but do not normally consume enough of it to contribute to control. Repeated removal of top growth (mowing) can be effective if it is possible and practical. Chemical applications generally provide 60 to 80%





control. Glyphosate can be used for spot treatment of small clumps of milkweed to prevent it from spreading and becoming a large colony. Dicamba with 2,4-D or triclopyr with 2,4-D are the most effective options for controlling large colonies of milkweed. Spring application is most effective, when plants are 12 to 15 inches tall. This application should be followed by mowing and then a fall herbicide application. Follow rates recommended on herbicide labels.

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