



**NATIONAL
WILDLIFE
FEDERATION**

Native Vs. Tropical Milkweed

Native plants thrive in their local climate and ecoregions, including rainfall patterns, temperature extremes, soils, topography, and geology. Native plants also do not require additional watering, pesticides, or fertilizers. Most importantly, wildlife rely on native plants. Monarchs, pollinators, and other native wildlife co-evolved with native plants – they need each other to survive and thrive!

When it comes to milkweed, planting native species is always encouraged by the National Wildlife Federation!

- ❖ Monarch caterpillars feed exclusively on milkweed leaves, the only host plant species for this iconic butterfly. As such, native milkweed is critical for the survival of monarchs.
- ❖ Native milkweed also provides a valuable nectar food source for many other native pollinators including bees, moths, beetles, skippers, flies, and other butterfly species!
- ❖ There are more than 70 native milkweed species in the U.S., of which, about 40 are commercially available in the nursery trade. There are many native choices for every region!



Monarch butterfly Feeding on (native) common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*)

Did You Know?

Native wildlife co-evolved over thousands of years with the plants that originated within their ecosystem. Native plants provide food, cover, and places to raise young. In turn, wildlife benefits plants through pollination and spreading seeds!



Above right: Monarch butterfly feeding on (native) butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*)
Above left: Monarch butterfly feeding on tropical milkweed (*Asclepias curassavica*)

Tropical Milkweed: A NO GROW!

Tropical milkweed (*Asclepias curassavica*) is a non-native, introduced species that remains active in winter when planted in temperate North American regions. Its lack of dormancy allows for the proliferation and spread of a parasitic organism, *Ophryocystis elektroscirrha* (OE for short) which causes deformed wings, disorientation, and, in severe cases, death in monarchs. Monarchs infested with OE easily pass the parasite to other monarchs.

Additionally, Monarchs rely on environmental signals to determine when to migrate, like the seasonal die-back of nectar-producing plants. In northern regions, tropical milkweed continues growing later into the cool season compared to native milkweed species, which can disrupt the monarch's migratory behavior by causing butterflies to breed and delay or prevent migration. If a cold snap occurs when lingering monarchs should be migrating, it can kill eggs, caterpillars, and adult butterflies.

Did You Know?

Tropical milkweed comes by several other common names. Look out for blood flower, scarlet milkweed, and Mexican butterfly weed at your local nursery, and always check the scientific name (*Asclepias curassavica*) to be certain.

You can easily identify tropical milkweed when it's in bloom. Look for bright red petals with orange hoods. No other milkweed has these colors and remember: tropical milkweed is a No Grow!



Bottom Right: Tropical milkweed (*Asclepias curassavica*)

Sourcing Native Milkweed and Other Native Plants

Support the monarch and its marvelous migration by creating native gardens at home, planting native milkweed, and restoring native habitats. Check out the following links and find reliable sources that provide lists of native plants by zip code, state, and ecoregions.

Learn more about native species to your area:

- ❖ [NWF Native Plant Finder](#): Discover native species of plants that support native pollinators based on your zip code (limited list).
- ❖ [NWF Keystone Plants by Ecoregion](#): Learn more about native keystone plants by the 15 broad North American ecoregions. Select native plants, in addition to native milkweed, that are vital in supporting local ecosystems and wildlife.
- ❖ [Xerces Society Pollinator Conservation Resource Center](#): Click here for a hub of information, tools, and resources to support pollinator conservation.
- ❖ [USDA Plants Database](#): This resource provides a comprehensive list of native plant species in the US, offering information on their taxonomy, native distribution, and ecological attributes.



Find and Purchase Native Milkweed!

- ❖ [NWF's Milkweed for Monarchs](#): This resource offers a collection of additional resources and places to source native milkweed.
- ❖ [Xerces Society Milkweed Finder](#): The Milkweed Seed Finder helps locate suitable milkweed seeds for your region.

Above right: Common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*)

Bottom: Monarch caterpillar feeding on native milkweed (*Asclepias* spp.)



**NATIONAL
WILDLIFE
FEDERATION**