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## Growing Milkweed

Milkweed is disappearing in many areas, and the insects relying on it, including Monarchs, are disappearing, too. Fortunately, many milkweeds are easily propagated and make outstanding garden plants.

Some species, such as Butterfly Weed, are available as potted plants, but many growers treat the plants with insecticides, making them lethal for several growing seasons. Going on-line, though, will disclose many sites with easy-to-follow directions for gathering and propagating seeds, as well as sources for seeds themselves.

Once established, milkweeds will thrive for many seasons. However, at this point they may be difficult to transplant.



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**John Cebula at [joceb2005@sbcglobal.net](mailto:joceb2005@sbcglobal.net)**

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# Life on a Milkweed

Presented by

**John's Nature for All!**



**140 species of milkweeds are found in North America.**

**Over 450 insect species depend on these native wildflowers.**



### **A Variety of Species**

Most regions have several species of milkweeds. In Northeastern Illinois, the most common species are Common, Swamp (Red), Whorled, and Butterfly. All of them attract a variety of attractive and beneficial insects.



Hundreds of insect species rely on milkweeds, either as a host plant for their larva, or as a food source for all stages of development. And while insect activity may make a plant look less attractive to humans, the insects cause no real damage. The Red Milkweed Beetle (above) is one such insect. For a few weeks each summer, adult beetles may be seen on milkweeds, especially the Common Milkweed. After mating, females lay eggs, which drop to the ground. The larva burrow into the ground and feed on the sap of the milkweed.

A variety of insects, including other beetles, true bugs, and moths, feed on milkweed. The flowers are a nectar and pollen source for many species of bees, moths, and butterflies.

### **The Sap**

Milkweeds contain a latex-like sap. During World War II, the U.S. military experimented using this sap to replace rubber. The sap is toxic to many animals, and its toxicity varies among milkweed species. Newly hatched Monarch caterpillars sometimes get trapped in the sap and die. (During WWII, the U.S. Navy used the fluff of milkweeds in the sailors' life vests.)



## **Monarchs**

Monarch butterflies are probably the best-known and most-loved insect in North America. Because of the attention they receive, their life-cycle and dependence on milkweed is widely appreciated. The larva thrive on the plant's leaves, despite the bitter sap, and the sap causes them to be distasteful to most predators. Even after their transformation into butterflies, Monarchs remain distasteful. However, they are still preyed upon by a variety of birds and other insects. The Monarchs that migrate to Mexico for the winter gradually lose some of their distasteful toxicity over the course of the season.