

Milkweed identification: quick key

Work top to bottom. The first two steps get you to the genus; the rest narrow it to a handful of species.

1. Is it a milkweed at all?

- Flowers in an umbel, where every flower stalk radiates from a single point.
- Each flower in two tiers: five petals bent sharply backward, five hoods forming a crown above them.
- Break a leaf. Thick white latex within seconds confirms it. Butterfly weed is the exception, with clear sap and orange flowers.
- No two-tiered flower and no latex means it is not a milkweed. Dogbane has latex but simple bell flowers and long paired pods.

2. How are the leaves arranged?

Arrangement	What you see	Typical species
Opposite	Two leaves per node, directly facing	Common, showy, swamp, purple, poke, prairie
Alternate	One leaf per node, staggered	Butterfly weed, antelope horns, green antelopehorn, plains
Whorled	Three or more leaves ringing the stem	Whorled, poison, narrowleaf, woollypod, fourleaf

3. What shape are the leaves?

Shape	Species to check
Thread-fine, 1-3 mm wide	Whorled, poison, plains, slimleaf, Feay's, pineneedle
Narrow and willow-like	Swamp, narrowleaf, Engelmann's, tall green
Broad and oblong, pale midrib	Common, prairie, velvetleaf
Nearly circular	Broadleaf, pallid, tufted
Heart-shaped, clasping the stem	Heartleaf (West), clasping (East), pinewoods (Southeast)
Effectively leafless stems	Rush milkweed, whitestem milkweed

4. What color are the flowers?

Color	Species
Cream	Antelope Horns, Plains Milkweed, Broadleaf Milkweed, Pallid Milkweed, Dwarf Milkweed, Sand Milkweed, Slimleaf Milkweed, Longhood Milkweed, Velvetleaf Milkweed, and 20 more
Gray	Carolina Milkweed
Green	Whorled Milkweed, Narrowleaf Milkweed, Antelope Horns, Poison Milkweed, Green Comet Milkweed, Broadleaf Milkweed, Engelmann's Milkweed, Dwarf Milkweed, Sand Milkweed, and 28 more
Magenta	Purple Milkweed
Maroon	Antelope Horns, Wheel Milkweed, California Milkweed, Heartleaf Milkweed, Bract Milkweed, Eastwood's Milkweed, Mahogany Milkweed
Mauve	Common Milkweed, Hall's Milkweed, Clasping Milkweed, Carolina Milkweed

Orange	Butterfly Weed, Tropical Milkweed, Fewflower Milkweed
Pink	Common Milkweed, Showy Milkweed, Swamp Milkweed, Narrowleaf Milkweed, Hall's Milkweed, Pallid Milkweed, Prairie Milkweed, Clasping Milkweed, Fourleaf Milkweed, and 8 more
Purple	Purple Milkweed, Green Antelopehorn, Longleaf Milkweed, California Milkweed, Heartleaf Milkweed, Bract Milkweed, Lemmon's Milkweed, Giant Milkweed
Red	Butterfly Weed, Tropical Milkweed, Fewflower Milkweed, Red Milkweed
Rose	Showy Milkweed, Swamp Milkweed, Prairie Milkweed
White	Common Milkweed, Swamp Milkweed, Whorled Milkweed, Narrowleaf Milkweed, Poison Milkweed, Plains Milkweed, Poke Milkweed, Fourleaf Milkweed, White Milkweed, and 19 more
Yellow	Butterfly Weed, Tropical Milkweed, Engelmann's Milkweed, Pineland Milkweed, Woolly Milkweed, Desert Milkweed, Savannah Milkweed

5. What do the pods look like?

- Warty, covered in soft spines: common milkweed.
- Woolly with blunt bumps: showy milkweed, woollypod milkweed.
- Smooth and spindle-shaped: swamp milkweed, butterfly weed, most narrow-leaved species.
- Smooth with a few short projections: prairie milkweed.
- Curved and pointing upward: antelope horns.
- Inflated and bristly, like a balloon: balloon plant, which is not a true milkweed.

Lookalikes worth knowing

Plant	Milky sap	Flowers	Safe for monarch larvae?
True milkweed (Asclepias)	Yes, except butterfly weed	Two-tiered, with hoods	Yes
Hemp dogbane	Yes	Small greenish bells	No, and not used
Black or pale swallowwort	Yes	Small dark star-shaped	No. Eggs laid, larvae die
Honeyvine milkweed	Yes	Small white, fragrant	Sometimes
Spurge	Yes, caustic	Minute, cup-like	No

Safety

Milkweed latex irritates skin and is genuinely dangerous in the eyes. Wear gloves when cutting stems, wash your hands afterward, and keep your hands away from your face. Never collect from rare or protected populations.

Full species accounts and photographs: <https://milkweedusa.com/identify/>