

Butterfly Weed

Asclepias tuberosa L.

Butterfly Milkweed, Orange Milkweed, Pleurisy Root, Chigger Flower

The one milkweed almost everyone recognizes: flat-topped clusters of brilliant orange flowers on a stiff, hairy, knee-high clump. It is the most garden-worthy species in the genus: tidy, drought-proof, long-lived and unbothered by anything except wet soil. It is also the odd one out in the family, with alternate leaves and watery rather than milky sap.



H. Zell. CC BY-SA 3.0. Wikimedia Commons.

Key facts

Field	Value	Field	Value
Status	Native	Height	1ft-3ft
Flowers	orange, yellow, red	Bloom	May to September
Light	Full sun	Soil	Dry, Average
USDA zones	3-9	Leaves	alternate, lanceolate
Sap	Clear (unusual)	Roots	Deep taproot, resents transplanting
Stratification	30 days cold-moist	States	43

How to identify it

- Sap is clear or barely cloudy. It is the only common North American milkweed that does not bleed white latex when a leaf is pulled.
- Leaves are alternate and stalkless, not paired opposite each other as in most milkweeds.
- Stems and leaves are noticeably rough-hairy; the whole plant feels sandpapery.
- Flowers range from yellow through pumpkin to nearly scarlet, often varying between plants in a single population.

Ecology

Butterfly weed is a nectar powerhouse. The shallow flowers are worked by fritillaries, swallowtails, hairstreaks, bumble bees and hundreds of small native bees. Monarchs lay on it readily, though the narrow leaves support fewer caterpillars per plant than the big-leaved species. Its clear sap is also lower in cardenolides than most milkweeds, which makes it a milder host.

Growing

Give it sun and sharp drainage and it will outlive you; give it clay that stays wet in winter and it will rot. The deep taproot means it hates being moved once established, so plant it small or sow it in place. It emerges very late in spring,

so mark the spot to avoid digging it up. No staking, no dividing, no feeding.

Cautions

Cardiac glycosides are present but low. Livestock avoid it. The old herbal name "pleurisy root" reflects historical medicinal use, not a safety endorsement. Do not ingest it.

Where it grows

Alabama, Arkansas, Arizona, Colorado, Connecticut, District of Columbia, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Maryland, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Mississippi, North Carolina, North Dakota, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia, Vermont, Wisconsin, West Virginia, Wyoming

More photographs



Rob Duval. CC BY-SA 3.0. Wikimedia Commons.



Frank Mayfield from Chicago area, USA. CC BY-S



Frank Mayfield from Chicago area, USA. CC BY-S

References

- Plants of the World Online: <https://powo.science.kew.org/taxon/urn:lsid:ipni.org:names:94704-1>
- GBIF: <https://www.gbif.org/species/3170305>
- iNaturalist: <https://www.inaturalist.org/taxa/47912>
- BONAP county map: <https://bonap.net/MapGallery/County/Asclepias%20tuberosa.png>

<https://milkweedusa.com/species/butterfly-weed/>