

Orange milkwort

(*Polygala lutea*)

For definitions of botanical terms, visit en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary_of_botanical_terms.

Orange milkwort is a short but showy wildflower found in bogs, savannas, pine flatwoods and roadside ditches throughout Florida. It typically blooms March through November, but can bloom year-round. Its flowers are self-pollinating. Its seeds are spread almost exclusively by ants. The seeds contain elaisomes — fleshy, oil- and protein-rich structures. Ants collect the seeds and take them to their nest where they and their larva consume the elaisomes, but leave the seed intact. The seeds are then tossed from the nest into favorable germinating conditions.



Photo by Eleanor Dietrich

Orange milkwort's bright orange flowers have three petals and five sepals. They are born in compact, thimble-shaped racemes atop long (1–2 inch) pedicels. Individual flowers are often indiscernible without magnification. Flowerheads are subtended by bracts. Basal leaves are thick, simple and spatulate with entire margins. Stem leaves are similar in shape, but smaller in size, becoming reduced as they ascend. Leaf arrangement is alternate. Fruit is a capsule. Roots have a minty aroma.

The name *Polygala* comes from the Greek *polys*, which means “many or much,” and *gala*, which means “milk.” It is so-named because it was once believed that the presence of *Polygala* species in cow fields would result in higher milk production (hence the common name of “milkwort” for both the genus and family). The species name *lutea* is from the Latin *luteum* or “yellow,” and refers to the flower's color when dried.

Like other species of *Polygala*, Orange milkwort is sometimes referred to as bachelor's buttons.

Family: Polygalaceae (Milkwort family)

Native range: Nearly throughout

To see where natural populations of Orange milkwort have been vouchered, visit www.florida.plantatlas.usf.edu.

Hardiness: Zones 8A–10B

Lifespan: Biennial

Soil: Moist to wet, acidic sandy soils

Exposure: Full sun to high pine shade

Growth habit: 3–9” tall

Propagation: Seed

Garden tips: Orange milkwort is rarely available commercially. It is easy to establish from seed, but difficult to transplant due to its strong taproot.