

Butterflyweed

(*Asclepias tuberosa*)

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

Butterflyweed is a perennial wildflower that occurs naturally in sandhills, pine flatwoods, and other sandy uplands. It is the larval host of Monarch, Queen and Soldier butterflies, and its blooms attract hummingbirds, bees and other pollinators.

Butterflyweed's bright orange to reddish flowers are born in showy terminal umbels. Each flower has a reflexed corolla and an upright corona—a characteristic typical of milkweed flowers. Stems are rough to hairy. Leaves are coarse, narrowly ovate to lanceolate, and oppositely arranged.

Seeds are born in erect follicles that dry and split open as the fruit matures. Each seed is attached to a white silky pappus that catches the wind and aids in dispersal.

Florida has two subspecies: *A. tuberosa* ssp. *rolfsii* is less bushy, has wavy leaf margins, and occurs throughout Florida. *A. tuberosa* ssp. *tuberosa* has flatter, narrow leaves and is often found in woodlands in northern Florida.

Asclepias tuberosa is an exception to the *Asclepias* genus in that its stem does not contain the milky latex that distinguishes the rest of the genus and gives it the common name "milkweed."

Family: Apocynaceae (dogbane family)

Native range: Nearly throughout

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

Lifespan: Perennial

Soil: Dry, well-drained sandy soils

Exposure: Full sun

Growth habit: 1–3' tall with 1–2' spread

Propagation: Cuttings, division, seed. Seeds can be stored in the refrigerator for a couple of months. Germinate on top of soil and cover lightly. Once sprouted, seedlings should be potted and allowed to grow to 3 inches before transplanting.

Florida regions of landscape suitability: North, Central, South

Garden tips: Butterflyweed is an excellent addition to butterfly gardens as well as any dry, hot landscape. The Florida subspecies tends to be less bushy than its northern counterpart.

Caution: Do not confuse this plant with the nonnative Tropical milkweed (*Asclepias curassavica*), which is typically sold at big box retail garden centers. Tropical milkweed does not die back in winter in Florida (as do native milkweeds) and can encourage overwintering in adult Monarchs. It is also linked to the transmission of the *Ophryocystis elektroscirrha* (OE) infection.

Seeds may be available through the Florida Wildflowers Growers Cooperative at www.FloridaWildflowers.com. Plants are often available at nurseries that specialize in native plants. Visit PlantRealFlorida.org to find a native nursery on your area.



Photo by Mary Keim