

PLANTING MILKWEEED SEED IN IOWA:

1. Plant seed on soil that has been tilled or loosened with a spade, fork, or trowel
2. Plant seed at the surface of the soil. Then lightly rake soil to help the seed make good contact or water with a sprinkler to do the same. Don't plant the seed below more than ¼ inch of soil or it will not grow.
3. Mark the location you planted so you will not forget in the spring. Then leave the seed to the cold.

Four milkweed species are available at the Nature Center while supplies last.

Common milkweed is the plant that most people recognize as milkweed. It can grow 6+ feet tall once established and has a deep rhizomous root structure that will result in many more milkweeds growing in the same area in future years. If you plant this milkweed be sure you have room and don't be afraid to pull out new shoots that are growing where you don't want them. Common milkweed has a pink ball of flowers that blooms in July and is very fragrant and attractive to pollinators for its nectar. If shorter plants are desired, the stem can be cut back to 12 inches and branches will sprout back.

Swamp milkweed is a plant that can handle wetter soil locations, but it does not need to have wet soil. It grows 4-5 feet tall and the stem often branches. It has a shallower root system and can be easily split and transplanted. The plant will likely have 1 stem the first year, and if it does well, will often produce more stems in the same location in following years, but it does not spread from the location. Swamp milkweed has smaller pink clusters of blossoms at the end of the stems and will bloom through August if the flowers are trimmed off after blooming. Flowers are not as fragrant, but are also high in nectar and attract many pollinators.

Butterfly milkweed is the milkweed that is most readily available commercially – you can get seed at most flower seed vendors in the spring. Plants are also available at nurseries that sell native plants. Butterfly milkweed grows only 2-3 feet tall, has a large taproot, and like swamp milkweed, will grow more stems from the root once it is established. Bright orange flower clusters full of nectar are the hallmark of this plant. The flowers will start lower on the stem and continue to bloom up the stem as the summer progresses. Again, if the dead flowers/young seeds are removed, blooming will last longer.

Whorled Milkweed is a species that shows little resemblance to a milkweed – until you look closely at the flower structure. The leaves are almost needle-like and emerge in groups of 3-5 from the stem in whorls. Stems grow 1-3 feet tall, seldom branching unless broken or eaten. Roots are thin, shallow & rhizomous and the plant will spread. Although the spreading nature of whorled milkweed is not as dense as Common, plants can be easily managed (or transplanted) by pulling those that are unwanted.

All four of these species are used by monarch caterpillars, but adults tend to lay their eggs on common and swamp milkweed first, then whorled before choosing the "hairier" leaves of butterfly milkweed.

Additionally, Rough Blazingstar seed is available for free inside the nature center. This is a favorite flower for migrating fall monarchs. Be patient with this plant. It will look like a blade of grass or 2 in year one, produce larger leaves and a sturdy bulb below ground in year two, before flowering in year three and beyond. Plant seed as you do milkweed seed.