Common Milkweed

Asclepias syriaca L.

Also known as: silkweed, silky milkweed, wild cotton, cottonweed, Virginia silk, showy milkweed

Common milkweed is a native perennial broadleaf commonly found across the United States and southern Canada. It can invade corn, soybean, small grain, hay, and pasture fields, but is also common along roadsides, field borders, and other disturbed or less managed areas. Common milkweed often appears after fields or other areas are disturbed. Like many herbaceous perennial weeds, it can be difficult to manage in no-till fields and permanent pastures. Common milkweed spreads by both seed and creeping root systems. Once plants become established, new shoots emerge from underground storage roots each year. Over time, these shoots form large patches that can persist for many years. Because of this growth habit, common milkweed is difficult to manage in agricultural fields with a single tillage pass or herbicide application.



Though valued by many landowners for its pollinator value, milkweed can be a weed in row crop fields and pastureland. (Photo credit: William Curran, Penn State)

In agricultural fields, common milkweed competes with crops and can reduce crop growth and decrease yield. Established populations are especially challenging in reduced-tillage systems because vegetative root buds on horizontal roots survive year after year, regrow, and spread after disturbance.

Common milkweed can also be toxic to livestock because the plant contains cardenolides (cardiac glycosides). Livestock generally avoid common milkweed when other forage is available, but poisoning can occur when sufficient plant material is consumed or when milkweed plant parts are present in hay. Long-term management generally depends on combining herbicides with cultural and mechanical practices over several growing seasons to gradually weaken or deplete underground root reserves.

Although common milkweed can be problematic in agricultural fields, it also has important ecological value and may be desirable for some landowners and managers. It is an important host plant for monarch butterfly larvae, and its flowers provide nectar for native bees, wasps, butterflies, and other pollinators. Other native milkweeds include butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), swamp milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*), and honeyvine milkweed (*Cynanchum laeve*). Butterfly weed and honeyvine milkweed do not produce milky sap, while swamp milkweed does. Butterfly weed and swamp milkweed are generally not considered agricultural weeds, while honeyvine milkweed can be problematic in agricultural fields, particularly in the Midwest. (For resources on encouraging milkweed, see a Xerces Society guide here and the Monarch Joint Venture here.)

Identifying Features

Common milkweed seedlings have smooth, light green stems (Figure 1). The cotyledons are dull green with rounded tips and visible veins. The first true leaves are opposite on the stem. These leaves are dark green with a waxy surface, and a distinct white midvein.



Figure 1: Common milkweed seedling with cotyledons and first true leaves (left) and young vegetative shoot (right) (Photo credit: Dr. Antonio DiTommaso, Cornell University)

In spring, established plants produce new vegetative shoots from creeping underground roots. These shoots are thicker and more robust than seedlings. Mature plants usually grow 3 to 5 feet tall. Stems are upright, hollow, and usually unbranched. The stem is green early in the season and may become reddish as the plant matures. Leaves are broadly oval to elliptic and have smooth margins (Figure 2A). The upper leaf surface is dark green and mostly hairless, whereas the lower leaf surface is lighter green and covered with fine hairs. A prominent white midvein is easy to see, and the secondary veins curve outward without reaching the leaf edge (Figure 2B). When the stem or leaves are broken, the plant releases a white milky sap (Figure 2C).

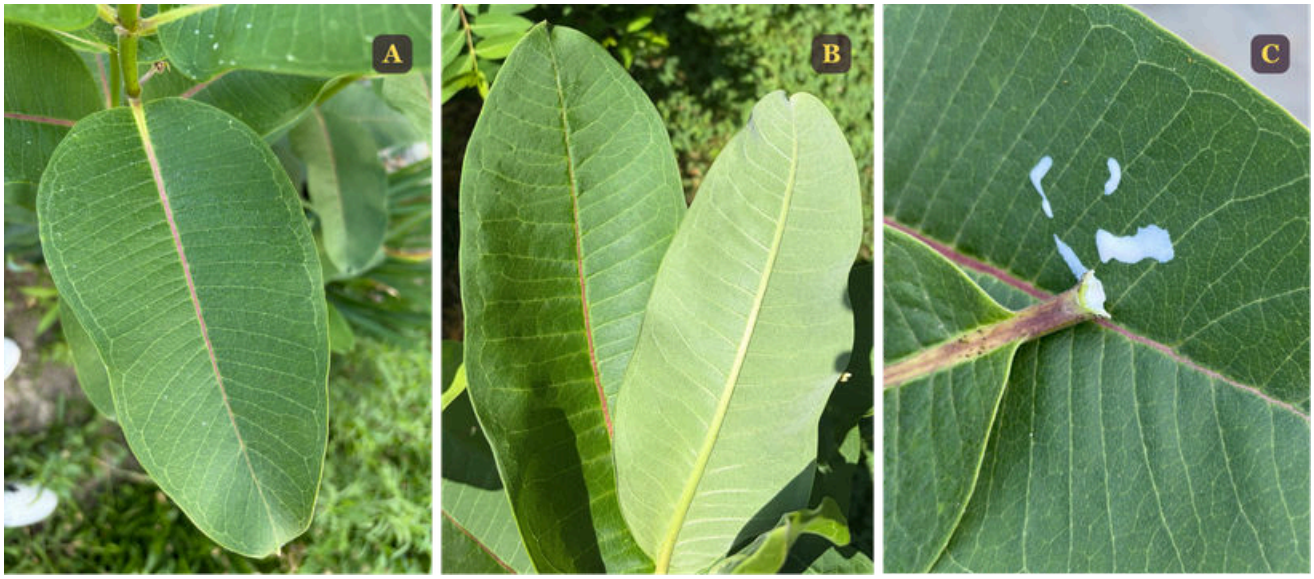


Figure 2, A: Common milkweed leaf showing the prominent midvein and lateral veins that curve without reaching the leaf edge, B: Upper (left) and lower (right) leaf surfaces of common milkweed, C: White milky sap exuding from a broken leaf petiole (Photo credit: Preetaman Bajwa, Cornell University)

Flowers grow in rounded clusters (umbels) near the upper leaves (Figure 3, next page). Flower color ranges from pink or purple to nearly white. Fruits are rough, teardrop-shaped follicles measuring 3 to 5 inches long. Pods often develop in pairs. As the pods mature, they turn brown and split open along one side. Each pod releases flat brown seeds attached to silky white hairs that are carried by the wind. Most seeds land near the parent plant. Field studies have reported average dispersal distances ranging from about 5 to 102 feet, with some seeds traveling more than 492 feet.

Identifying Features (cont.)



Figure 3, A: Common milkweed flowers, B: Common milkweed flower clusters at different stages of development (Photo credit: Preetaman Bajwa, Cornell University)

Common milkweed is often confused with hemp dogbane (*Apocynum cannabinum*). Hemp dogbane usually has thinner stems that branch in the upper part of the plant. In contrast, common milkweed generally has thicker stems that remain unbranched. Young hemp dogbane leaves are nearly hairless, while common milkweed leaves are covered with fine hairs, particularly on the lower surface. Although both species produce milky sap, hemp dogbane typically develops extensive upper branching and has narrower, smoother leaves than common milkweed (Figure 4). The flowers also differ between the two species. Hemp dogbane has greenish-white flowers and long, narrow, curved seed pods. Common milkweed has pink to purple flower clusters that are fragrant, producing large, rough, teardrop-shaped seed pods.

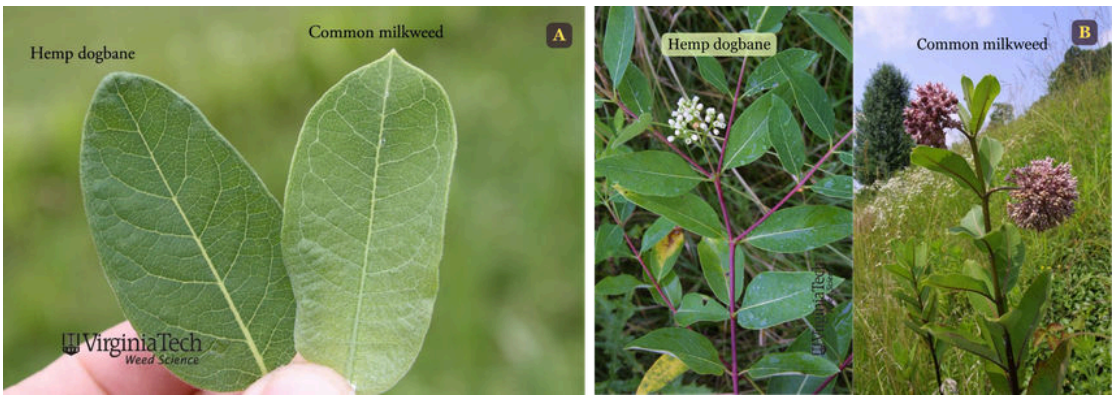


Figure 4: Hemp dogbane and common milkweed leaf differences (A), as well as differences in flowers and plant architecture (B). (Photo credit: Virginia Tech Weed ID Guide)

Seed Production and Perennial Reproduction

Common milkweed is a perennial plant that reproduces by both seed and creeping underground roots. Flowering generally begins about six to eight weeks after shoot emergence. Flowers are largely self-incompatible and require insects for pollination. Individual plants commonly produce several seed pods, although production varies with pollination success and environmental conditions. Each mature pod contains about 100 to 425 seeds. Seeds are released during late summer and fall as mature pods dry and split open. Silky hairs attached to the seeds allow them to be carried by the wind (Figure 5A). Seeds require exposure to cold, moist conditions during winter to break dormancy, with germination occurring primarily the following spring. During the first growing season, seedlings invest most of their energy into developing a deep taproot and underground root system and rarely flower that first season.



Figure 5, A: Common milkweed seeds with silky white hairs, B: Common milkweed seeds, C: Immature follicle (Photo credit: A- Dr. Antonio DiTommaso, Cornell University; B, C- Preetaman Bajwa, Cornell University)

In autumn, aboveground shoots are killed by frost, but the underground root system survives the winter and produces new shoots the following season. New shoots emerge from root buds in mid-spring and may continue to emerge throughout the summer. Vegetative spread usually begins during the second or third year after establishment, allowing existing patches to spread and persist for years. Because these shoots rely on carbohydrate reserves stored in the root system, plants often recover after mowing, cultivation, or herbicide applications. Root fragments containing viable buds may regenerate new shoots under favorable conditions.

Herbicide Resistance

As of 2026, no confirmed cases of herbicide-resistant common milkweed have been reported in the International Herbicide-Resistant Weed Database (Heap 2026).

Integrated Weed Management Options

Crop Rotation and Crop Competition

Crop rotation is an effective strategy when combined with mowing, cultivation, or herbicide programs that repeatedly stress underground root reserves. Rotations that include perennial forage crops, such as alfalfa, increase crop competition while repeated mowing weakens established plants. A competitive crop canopy that develops early in the season also reduces light availability and limits shoot growth and seed production. Including small grains in the rotation provides an additional opportunity to treat milkweed regrowth after harvest in late summer or early fall.

Tillage and Mowing

A single tillage pass rarely provides acceptable control because new shoots continue to emerge from deep underground storage roots. Better suppression is achieved with repeated shallow tillage or cultivation during the growing season, which gradually depletes carbohydrate reserves stored in the roots. Cultivation is most effective when repeated before new shoots have enough time to replenish root reserves. Root carbohydrate reserves are generally lowest during mid- to late summer, making repeated disturbance during this period particularly useful for weakening established plants. Similarly, a single mowing only removes top growth, whereas repeated mowing over multiple years can reduce plant vigor, particularly in forage systems. Timely mowing can also be an effective strategy to help prevent seed production.

Prevention and Monitoring

Preventing seed production and minimizing the movement of root fragments on tillage and harvesting equipment can help limit the spread of common milkweed between fields. Established infestations can also expand within a field through lateral underground roots. Fields should be monitored throughout the growing season because surviving root systems can continue producing new shoots even after aboveground plants have been removed. Repeated scouting allows timely implementation of follow-up management before plants restore underground carbohydrate reserves into their roots.

Herbicide Control Options

Pre-plant burndown (no-till systems): In no-till systems, established common milkweed is difficult to control with herbicides prior to planting. Because common milkweed is a perennial with an extensive underground root system, established plants often regrow following burndown and require additional control later in the season. Common burndown programs that include glyphosate (Group 9) mixed with 2,4-D or dicamba (Group 4) will provide initial suppression and allow for more timely postemergence control.

As for residual herbicides for controlling plants emerging from seeds, metribuzin, atrazine and cloransulam provided at least 85% control. But these products will not control plants emerging from rootstocks.

The following table includes some labeled herbicide options for common milkweed. Every application timing is specific to the crop. Always check herbicide labels or consult with your local extension weed specialist.

Cotton	Over the top postemergence	glufosinate/Group 10 (Liberty)[1], dicamba/Group 4 (Clarity)[1], 2,4-D choline/Group 4 (Enlist One)[1], glyphosate/Group 9 (Roundup PowerMAX)[1]
	Directed postemergence	paraquat/Group 22 (Gramoxone), glyphosate/Group 9 (Roundup PowerMAX), glufosinate/Group 10 (Liberty) [suppressed]
Corn	Over the top postemergence	dicamba/Group 4 (Clarity), 2,4-D/Group 4 (2,4-D), dicamba/Group 4 + diflufenzopyr/Group 19 (Status), glufosinate/Group 10 (Liberty)[1], glyphosate/Group 9 (Roundup PowerMAX)[1]
Peanut	Over the top postemergence	clorimuron/Group 2 (Classic), acifluorfen/Group 14 (Ultra Blazer) [suppressed]
Sorghum	Over the top postemergence	halosulfuron/Group 2 + dicamba/Group 4 (Yukon), dicamba/Group 4 (Clarity), 2,4-D/Group 4 (2,4-D)
Soybean	Over the top postemergence	clorimuron/Group 2 (Classic) + [clorimuron-ethly + thifensulfuron-methyl]/Group 2 (Synchrony) [suppressed], glufosinate/Group 10 (Liberty)[1], dicamba/Group 4 (Stryax)[1], 2,4-D choline/Group 4 (Enlist One)1, glyphosate/Group 9 (Roundup PowerMAX)[1]
Wheat	Over the top postemergence	2,4-D/Group 4 (2,4-D), dicamba/Group 4 (Clarity)

NOTE: These are examples of effective active ingredients; this may not be a comprehensive list. There may be other tradenames of these active ingredients, and these active ingredients may be a component of premixes, as well. Always check with your local Extension weed specialist for recommendations for your region. Always read and follow the label.

[1]Requires corresponding herbicide-tolerant trait for crop safety

Herbicide Control Options Chart by Preetaman Bajwa, Cornell University

Author
Preetaman Bajwa, Cornell University

Editors
Mark VanGessel, University of Delaware
Michael Flessner, Virginia Tech
William Curran, Penn State emeritus
John Wallace, Penn State
Emily Unglesbee, GROW
Vipan Kumar, Cornell University

Resources

Cornell University Weed profiles – Common milkweed
https://cals.cornell.edu/weed-science/weed-profiles/common-milkweed

Cornell University's Turfgrass and Landscape Weed ID app
https://turfweeds.cals.cornell.edu/plants

Monarch Joint Venture – Milkweed FAQs
https://monarchjointventure.org/faq/milkweed

Penn State Extension – Common Milkweed
https://extension.psu.edu/common-milkweed

USDA-NRCS Plant guide
https://plants.sc.egov.usda.gov/DocumentLibrary/plantguide/pdf/cs_assy.pdf

Citations

Bakacsy, L., & Bagi, I. (2020). Survival and regeneration ability of clonal common milkweed (Asclepias syriaca L.) after a single herbicide treatment in natural open sand grasslands. Scientific Reports, 10(1), 14222

Jeffery, L. S., & Robison, L. R. (1971). Growth characteristics of common milkweed. Weed Science, 19(3), 193-196

Heap, I. The International Herbicide-Resistant Weed Database. Online. Monday, August 31, 2026. www.weedscience.org

Meader J. 2018. Milkweed. UConn Home & Garden Education Center, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT. Accessed August 31, 2026.
https://homegarden.cahnr.uconn.edu/factsheets/milkweed/

Citations (cont.)

Mohler, C. L., Teasdale, J. R., & DiTommaso, A. (2021). Manage weeds on your farm: a guide to ecological strategies. Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education. 239-242 https://www.sare.org/resources/manage-weeds-on-your-farm/

Morse, D. H., & Schmitt, J. (1985). Propagule size, dispersal ability, and seedling performance in Asclepias syriaca. Oecologia, 67(3), 372-379

Stamm-Katovich, E. J., Wyse, D. L., & Biesboer, D. D. (1988). Development of common milkweed (Asclepias syriaca) root buds following emergence from lateral roots. Weed Science, 36(6), 758-763.

Stup, R. S., Westbrook, A. S., & DiTommaso, A. (2025). Friend or foe? Conservation and management of common milkweed (Asclepias syriaca L.). Weed Technology, 39, e85

USDA-ARS (U.S. Department of Agriculture-Agricultural Research Service). 2026. Milkweed (Asclepias spp.). Poisonous Plant Research Laboratory, Logan, UT. Accessed August 31, 2026. https://www.ars.usda.gov/pacific-west-area/logan-ut/poisonous-plant-research/docs/milkweed-asclepias-spp/

Yenish, J. P, T. A. Fry, B. R. Durgan, and D. L. Wyse. 1996. Tillage effects on seed distribution and common milkweed (Asclepias syriaca L.) establishment. Weed Science, 44:815-820

CITE AS: Bajwa, P., Kumar, V., Unglesbee, E., Flessner, M., Wallace, J., VanGessel, M., Curran, W. (2026). Common Milkweed. Getting Rid of Weeds (GROW) Through Integrated Weed Management. https://growiwm.org/weeds/common-milkweed/