

Milkweed Plant (*Asclepias*)

Asclepias are perennial herbs from thick roots or deep rhizomes with alternate or whorled fleshy leaves, flowers in terminal or axillary umbels and plumose seeds in inflated fruit pods called follicles.

Milkweed flowers are some of the most complex in the plant kingdom and like orchids, they evolved elaborate structures to effect pollination and ensure cross-fertilization. The plants are eaten by larvae of monarch butterflies (*Danaus plexippus*), which metabolize toxins from the milkweed plant, making them unpalatable to birds.

Asclepias is an American genus in the Dogbane (Apocynaceae) family comprising approximately 100 species, most of which occur in the United States. In New York City, eleven wild species have been documented, although only three are common today and several may be extinct.

See all species of Milkweed in New York City [here](#).

How many species can you observe?



Asclepias syriaca - Common Milkweed

Holmgren et al., 1998. Illustrated companion to Gleason and Cronquist's Manual, New York Botanical Garden Press.



Asclepias tuberosa - Butterfly Milkweed

By Photo by and (c)2009 Derek Ramsey (Ram-Man) - Self-photographed, GFDL 1.2, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=7134094>

New York City EcoFlora

Monarch Butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*)



Life-cycle of the Monarch Butterfly (from top left to right): egg, caterpillar, pupae, adult laying eggs.

Egg: By Bfpape - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=35048874>

Caterpillar: By © Derek Ramsey / derekr Ramsey.com, GFDL 1.2, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=2854109>

Chrysalis: By Greyson Orlando - Own work, CC BY 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=3652447>

Adult laying eggs: By Photo by and (c)2009 Derek Ramsey (Ram-Man) - Self-photographed, GFDL 1.2, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=7125789>



Monarch and Viceroy (right). The Viceroy is a Mullerian mimic, benefitting from the birds aversion to the toxic Monarch. Note the straight line running across the wing of the Viceroy and the curved line of the Monarch.

By PiccoloNamek (2005-08-22, uploaded by User:Lokal_Profil on 13:50, June 15, 2006) and Derek Ramsey (User:Ram-Man). - Image:Viceroy Butterfly.jpg and Image:Monarch Butterfly Danaus plexippus Purple Coneflower 3008.jpg, GFDL 1.2, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=3611141>

The Monarch Butterfly is an iconic American insect with a fascinating history and complex life cycle. Every year, the species migrates from its winter home in the mountains of Mexico north across the continent all the way to Canada. As they make their way north, up to four generations seek mates and milkweed plants to rear their young (larvae), tracking the appearance of milkweed plants as summer advances north. Adults that matured in the Appalachians reach New York City in May and June. As the days shorten and milkweed plants go dormant, hormonal changes depress breeding activity and promote the migratory instinct. Fat stored during the larval phase enables individual monarchs to travel up to 3,000 miles back to Mexico where the process begins anew.

As with all wildlife in the City, record your observations but do not disturb the animal's activities.

See all iNaturalist observations of Monarch Butterflies in New York City [here](#).

How many life stages can you observe?

Milkweeds of New York City



Clasping Milkweed
*Asclepias amplexicaulis*¹



Poke Milkweed
*Asclepias exaltata*²



swamp milkweed
*Asclepias incarnata*³



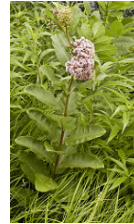
Purple Milkweed
*Asclepias purpurascens*¹



Four-leaved Milkweed
*Asclepias quadrifolia*³



Red Milkweed
*Asclepias rubra*³



common milkweed
*Asclepias syriaca*⁴



butterfly milkweed
*Asclepias tuberosa*⁵



Redring Milkweed
*Asclepias variegata*⁶



Whorled Milkweed
*Asclepias verticillata*⁷



Green Comet Milkweed
*Asclepias viridiflora*³

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