

Asclepias syriaca

[Synonyms : *Asclepias cornuti*, *Asclepias intermedia*, *Asclepias kansana*, *Asclepias syriaca* var. *kansana*]

MILKWEED is a perennial. Found in eastern North America it has small very cloyingly fragrant, nearly white or dull red or purple flowers.

It is also known as *Asklepiado Siria* (Esperanto), Broadleaf milkweed, Budgerigar flower, Common milkweed, Common silkweed, *Cotonnier* (French-Canadian), Cotton milkweed, Cottonweed, *Echte Seidenpflanze* (German), *Glejovka americká* (Slovak), *Herbe à la ouate* (French), Kansas milkweed, *Karipiku* (Pawnee North American Indian), *Klejcha mléčící* (Czech), *Klejcha hedvábná* (Czech), *Klejcha vatočník* (Czech), *Mahintsh* (Winnebago North American Indian), *Mesisilkkirytti* (Finnish), Milk plant, Purple silkweed, *Sidenört* (Swedish), *Seidenpflanze* (German), Silk grass, Silkweed, Silky swallow-wort, Swallow-wort, Syrian milkweed, Syrian silkweed, *Syrische Seidenpflanze* (German), *Syrische Seidenwurz* (German), Virginia silk, Virginia swallow-wort, *Wahtha* (Omaha and Ponca North American Indian), and Wild cotton.

The silky-down topped seeds are dispersed by wind or water.

Warning – the whole plant is poisonous in large quantities (particularly for children). It can cause nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, salivation, muscle paralysis, cramps and death, and the milky latex can irritate the skin. It can be poisonous for animals which normally avoid it.

Syriaca means ‘of or from Syria’ as originally it was thought to be native to the Middle East not North America.

Various North American Indian tribes, including the Menominee and Mohican Indians ate the plant. For the Omaha, Pawnee, Ponca, Winnebago, Dakota, Iroquois, Meskwaki and Chippewa tribes the buds and green fruit pods (and the leaves, stems and whole young plants when only a few inches high according to the individual tribe’s practice) could all be cooked as vegetables. John Charles Frémont (1813-1890) the American explorer and politician, reported that Indians in the Platte River region prepared a dish of buffalo meat with the pods. Both the Meskwaki and Potawatomi tribes used the buds for making soup, and the Meskwaki and some of the Chippewa Indians dried the buds or flowers for preserves and Winter food. The Chippewa also ate milkweed before tribal feasts as they believed it could enhance appetite.

The seed down (or floss) was used by several North American Indian tribes not least the Menominee for sewing. More recently in Europe the down has been used by the textile communities particularly in France and Russia and it has not only been considered as a cotton (*Gossypium*) substitute but has also been made up into vegetable silk. The stem fibres will yield thread that is not only very long and fine but also has a glossy whiteness – and this also provided sewing thread for the Meskwaki, Potawatomi and Menominee Indians. The Cherokee used the plant for making bowstrings, while the Menominee made cord for fishing tackle. But these pragmatic uses were balanced by little boys of the Omaha, Ponca, Pawnee and Winnebago tribes who chewed the stems to release the fibres and used this wadding in their popguns.

Records also show that the milky sap provided a gummy substance applied by the Mahuna tribe

when setting stones in necklaces, bracelets and other jewellery.

The plant offered some medicinal virtues for several Indian tribes including the Potawatomi. It was used by the Chippewa and Iroquois to treat various female disorders, and by the Cherokee and Iroquois tribes for some kidney problems. The latter also used it in treatments for some stomach upsets, rheumatism, bee stings and cuts. It seems to have had some popularity with the Rappahannock, Iroquois and Cherokee tribes for dealing with warts. The Cherokee also used milkweed for some venereal diseases, while the Menominee appear to have included it in remedies for different lung ailments. It was an ingredient in a short-term contraceptive used by the Iroquois, and the Cherokee prescribed it for backache.

In Canada the tender young shoots have been eaten like garden asparagus (*Asparagus officinalis*), and young leaves can also be prepared like spinach (*Spinacia oleracea*). The flowers contain so much nectar that they have been collected in the early morning when still covered with dew and used to make a kind of sugar.

The plant's silky down has provided stuffing for beds and pillows, and it has also been used to make hats.

Milkweed is the primary food of Monarch butterflies, and this makes the adult butterflies (and larvae) poisonous for their predators.

Medicinally, the underground stem (and the milky sap) has been part of treatment for respiratory disorders such as asthma particularly among herbalists in the United States. It has also been used to ease pain.