

BELL COUNTY MASTER GARDENER
Tip of the Week
By Beverly Wickersham
“A Visit With the Milkweed Family”

More than 140 species of Milkweeds have been identified. The Milkweeds, a member of the *Asclepiadaceae* family, get their name from the thick white sap that oozes from any broken plant surface. This sap is poisonous to livestock; however, they will avoid eating the plant unless they are desperate for food.

The family name honors Asclepias, the god of medicine and good health in Greek mythology. The three species that can be readily found in the Central Texas are “Antelope Horns” (*Asclepias asperula*)—the most common milkweed in our area; “Butterfly Weed” or “Orange Milkweed” (*Asclepias tuberosa*)—the most striking milkweed, also known as “Pleurisy Root” because it was used to relieve inflammation of the lining of the lungs and thorax. The root of the Butterfly Milkweed was officially listed in the *U.S. Pharmacopoeia* from 1820 to 1905. The third variety is “Green Milkweed” (*Asclepias viridis*) a stout, erect plant with an inflorescence similar to “Antelope Horns”.

The milkweed plants provide an important food source for numerous butterflies, hummingbirds, bees, moths, beetles, true bugs, and other nectar seeking insects. Perhaps most importantly, it is the primary food source for the Monarch Butterfly’s larvae (the caterpillar stage). The Monarch Butterfly larvae feed almost exclusively on these plants.

Species in the Milkweed family grow their seeds in follicles, commonly called a pod—think of an Okra pod. These follicles contain soft filaments known either as *silk* or *floss*. The filaments are attached to individual seeds. When the follicle ripens and pops open, the seeds (sometimes hundreds) are blown by the wind and eventually fall in a spot where they can take root and produce another plant. The soft filaments have been used as insulation in vests and gloves. Because the Milkweed does not transplant well (although propagation is sometimes successful), our best hope of increasing the Milkweed population in our yards and flower beds is to collect the follicles after they burst open and then scatter the filaments that are attached to seeds in a cultivated area of the garden or yard. Simply rake over the scattered seeds, water lightly, and hope for a good crop of “food” for the Monarch larvae and for the many other beneficial insects that visit this unique wildflower.

Have any questions about gardening in Central Texas? Contact ask.bcmga@gmail.com

