

*Asclepias syriaca* L.

common milkweed



Left—flowers and upper stem. Right—fruit (a follicle) with seeds visible.

This plant is a familiar species of open uplands, including fields, roadsides, and forest edges. It is a valuable wild edible given the broad range of time that various parts of it can be eaten. It is one of ten different species of milkweed that occur in New England.

*Asclepias syriaca* is characterized by leaf blades that are soft-hairy beneath and borne on leaf stalks 5–15 mm long. The flowers are purple-green to light purple or red and have a whorl of five tubular hoods, each of which encloses a slender appendage called a horn (note that the horn does not exceed the height of the tubular hood, as is the case in some species). The fruits are covered with thin, raised, wart-like projections (unique amongst our milkweeds). It is important that one study the morphology of this plant in order to be able to identify it as a shoot (arguably its best stage for food). In late spring *Asclepias syriaca* sends up a thick, gray shoot with opposite leaves that is covered with very short, soft hairs. The stem, which will be unbranched at that time, may have as many as several pairs of oppositely arranged leaves. If broken or bruised, the stems and leaves will exude a milky liquid, due to a white latex present in the sap. One needs to be cautious not to confuse this plant with species of *Apocynum* (dogbane), which also have white latex in the sap and opposite leaves. Species of *Apocynum* are poisonous, but can be separated from *Asclepias syriaca* due to their glabrous (i.e., lacking hairs) stems that may be branched in the early season.



Early shoot of *Asclepias syriaca* (compare with *Apocynum androsaemifolium*).

These are important distinctions as milkweeds and dogbanes often grow together in the same habitat. *Asclepias syriaca* flowers from early to late July.

The early shoots, young leaves, flower buds, flowers, and immature fruits (while still shorter than 3 cm) of *Asclepias syriaca* can all be eaten and are excellent. In fact, this is one of my favorite edible plants in the region. All parts of the plant are best prepared by boiling for a short period (3–5 minutes, depending on personal preference). This species was eaten by the Chippewa, Dakota, Iroquois, Ojibwa, Omaha, Winnebago, and other Native American tribes. Much has been written about the supposed toxicity and bitter taste of *Asclepias syriaca*. I, and others whom I know, routinely eat this plant without prolonged cooking in several changes of water (and occasionally eat portions of the plant uncooked). I am in agreement with Sam Thayer that the myth surrounding the need to cook *Asclepias syriaca* in multiple changes of water likely arose due to accidental collection of a species of *Apocynum* (dogbane).

*Asclepias syriaca* has been used medicinally to treat warts. The fresh sap from a broken stem would be placed on the warts twice a day for a week. Several Native American tribes were known to use this remedy, including the Cherokee, Iroquois, and Rappahannock. The roots of this species contain asclepiadian, asclepione, and galitxon. These are known to both irritate and stimulate the gastrointestinal tract (i.e., they are emetic and purgative), decrease thickness and increase fluidity of mucus in the lungs and bronchial tubes (i.e., expectorant), and increase perspiration (i.e., diaphoretic).

The stems of *Asclepias syriaca* possess some of the highest quality fibers for cordage. Though not quite as strong as *Apocynum* (dogbane) and *Urtica* (stinging-nettle), I find them to be softer. They are best collected in the fall, after the stems lose their green color and become dry. Though best in the fall, the stems stand up out of the snow through much of the winter and can be collected during this time as well. Flatten the stems and then split them open using your thumb. Flatten the opened stems out, allowing easy removal of the inner pith from the fibers (bend the flattened stems to crack the inner, brittle material and strip it off the outer fibers). Roll the fibers in your hand or on your leg to remove the outer, chaffy layer (the epidermis). The fibers can be made into good cord for many uses, including bow drills and strings for bows. The older the stems get, the more difficult it becomes to easily remove the fibers from the inner pith. A short period of soaking in water (ca. 1 minute) can sometimes assist in making the fibers more flexible while still keeping the inner pith brittle for easy removal. Be sure to dry the fibers completely before proceeding to make cordage. Reverse-wrapped cords of about 5 mm thickness are suitable for hunting bows drawing under 20 kg. Though slender cords can be used for bow drill strings, those of 8–10 mm thickness work well and hold up longer to the abrasive stress of this fire-making tool. Though the cord from *Asclepias syriaca* can be used for many aspects of primitive trapping, they do not work well for winter snares that target snowshoe hare, as this animal readily consumes the cord (rather than walking through them)!

The hairs attached to the seeds are useful in fire making as a tinder source. The hairs are a coal extender (i.e., they will increase the size of the coal, but will not burst into flame).

