
Wildflower Spot – July 2008

John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

SWAMP MILKWEED

Asclepias incarnata

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These deep pink flowers in wide clusters on five-foot stems are magnets to butterflies, which find their faint vanilla scent irresistible. Swamp milkweed is one of the best attractors of the Monarch butterfly which feeds on the flowers and lays its eggs on the plants. The long and narrow opposite leaves provide a ready food source for the caterpillars. After a long blooming period, from June through August, upright thin pods are produced which split open in the fall, releasing seeds attached to silky hairs that act as parachutes to carry the seeds on the currents of the wind.

Unlike other members of the milkweed group, this species does not have milky sap. They have specialized roots for living in heavy wet soils, and the thick white roots are adapted to live in environments low in oxygen. Swamp milkweed prefers moist open areas and is typically found growing wild near the edges of ponds, lakes, open ditches and low areas.

The plant is found in every county in Virginia, growing easily in full sun and moist soil in local gardens. Use swamp milkweed at the back of perennial borders, and along pond and stream banks. A number of cultivars are available in



colors from white, soft pink-purple to dark purple. The flowers can be cut for a long-lasting display in the home, and the seedpods can be used for winter arrangements.

On an expedition to Utah in 1850, a traveler reported that the Pueblo Indians rub the stems to separate the fibers, to make beautiful and very strong fishing lines and fine sewing thread. A decoction was used for various medicinal purposes. Although American colonists used swamp milkweed for asthma, rheumatism, worms, and as a heart tonic, the plant is potentially toxic. ❖