Common name: **Common Milkweed**  Genus Species: **Asclepias syriaca**

**Description:** Common milkweed is a perennial herbaceous plant growing 1.9 to 6.5 feet tall. Its small, green to purple flowers have both male and female parts. Flowers are grouped into showy clusters.

**Habitats:** Common milkweed is found along banks and flood plains of lakes, ponds, and waterways, and in prairies, forest margins, roadsides, and waste places.

**Phenology highlight:** Common milkweed is used by many insects including butterflies and bees, and the alert observer may see pollinators, eggs, or caterpillars on milkweed.

**Species facts**
- Milkweed pollinators include monarchs, other butterflies, bees, and other beneficial insects.
- Milkweed is required for monarch reproduction. The female butterfly must lay her eggs on milkweed since that is the only food the caterpillars can eat.
- Compounds in milkweed sap make the flesh of caterpillars feeding on the plants distasteful to most predators.
- People have used milkweed for fiber, food, and medicine across the U. S. and southern Canada.

**Why observe this species?** Common milkweed has been selected for monitoring by a Nature’s Notebook partner, Monarch Watch, because monarch butterflies require milkweeds for their survival. Monarch populations have declined over 90% since the 1990’s.

**Tip for observing this species:** For common milkweed, be sure to wait until the fruits split open to expose the seeds before recording ‘yes’ for the “ripe fruits” phenophase.

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For more information about phenology and the New York Phenology Project (NYPP), please visit the NYPP website (www.nyphenologyproject.org) and the USA-NPN website (www.usanpn.org).
Common Milkweed (Asclepias syriaca)

Initial growth: New growth is visible after a period of no growth (winter or drought) as new shoots or seedlings break through the soil surface. Growth is "initial" until the first leaf has fully unfolded.

Leaves: One or more live fully unfolded leaves are visible. Count only true leaves and not the small leaves (cotyledons) found on the stem right after a seedling germinates. Do not include fully dried or dead leaves.

Flowers or flower buds: One or more fresh open or unopened flowers or flower buds are visible. Include developing flower buds but do not include wilted or dried flowers.

Open flowers: One or more open fresh flowers are visible. Flowers are considered "open" when the reproductive parts (male stamens or female pistils) are visible. Do not include wilted or dried flowers.

Fruits: One or more fruits (pods) are visible on the plant. Common milkweed fruit is large and pod-like. Unripe fruits are green. Do not include empty fruits that have already dropped all of their seeds.

Ripe fruits: One or more ripe fruits are visible on the plant. For common milkweed, a fruit is ripe when it has turned tan or brown and has split open to expose seeds with fluff. Do not include empty fruits.

Monarchs and Milkweeds: The loss of milkweed from natural and agricultural areas is one of the primary threats to monarchs. Milkweed is the only food that monarch caterpillars eat and a major nectar source for adults.

Note: flower and fruit phenophases are nested so you may need to record more than one phenophase for each; for example, if you record Y for “open flowers” you should also record Y for “flowers or flower buds.”

All phenophases are pictured here.