

# *Asclepias curassavica* Butterfly Weed, Milkweed, Silkweed<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Butterfly weed is a member of the milkweed family and by some reports, the only *Asclepias* that does consistently well in south Florida. The plant can be grown as an annual flower or as a perennial. The plants grow to two- to four-foot-tall and flower from spring until fall. The flower colors are red and orange borne in clusters at the top of the plant. Butterflies can usually be seen flying around the plant and visiting the flowers.



Figure 1. Full form—*Asclepias curassavica*: butterfly weed, milkweed, silkweed.

Credits: Edward F. Gilman, UF/IFAS



Figure 2. Leaf—*Asclepias curassavica*: butterfly weed, milkweed, silkweed.

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Figure 3. Flower—*Asclepias curassavica*: butterfly weed, milkweed, silkweed.

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## General Information

**Scientific name:** *Asclepias curassavica*

**Pronunciation:** as-KLEE-pee-us kur-uh-SAV-ick-uh

**Common name(s):** butterfly weed, milkweed, silkweed, bloodflower

**Family:** Apocynaceae

**Plant type:** herbaceous; annual

**USDA hardiness zones:** 4 through 10 (Figure 4)

**Planting months for zone 7:** June; July

**Planting months for zone 8:** May; June; July; August

**Planting months for zone 9:** Mar; April; May; June; July; August; September

**Planting month for zone 10 and 11:** Feb; Mar; April; May; June; July; August; September; October; November; December

**Origin:** native to Central America, North America, Mexico, and South America

**Invasive potential:** Caution—may be recommended by UF/IFAS faculty but should be managed to prevent its escape (reassess in 2 years)

**Uses:** naturalizing; cut flowers; attracts butterflies; mass planting

**Availability:** somewhat available, may have to go out of the region to find the plant



Figure 4. Shaded area represents potential planting range.

## Description

**Height:** 1 to 2 feet

**Spread:** 1 to 2 feet

**Plant habit:** round; upright

**Plant density:** moderate

**Growth rate:** fast

**Texture:** medium

## Foliage

**Leaf arrangement:** alternate

**Leaf type:** simple

**Leaf margin:** entire

**Leaf shape:** oblong

**Leaf venation:** parallel

**Leaf type and persistence:** deciduous

**Leaf blade length:** 4 to 8 inches

**Leaf color:** green

**Fall color:** not applicable

**Fall characteristic:** not applicable

## Flower

**Flower color:** red; yellow

**Flower characteristic:** summer-flowering; spring-flowering

## Fruit

**Fruit shape:** unknown

**Fruit length:** unknown

**Fruit cover:** unknown

**Fruit color:** unknown

**Fruit characteristic:** inconspicuous and not showy

## Trunk and Branches

**Trunk/bark/branches:** not applicable

**Current year stem/twig color:** green

**Current year stem/twig thickness:** thick

## Culture

**Light requirement:** plant grows in full sun

**Soil tolerances:** acidic; slightly alkaline; sand; loam; clay

**Drought tolerance:** high

**Soil salt tolerance:** poor

**Plant spacing:** 18 to 24 inches

## Other

**Roots:** not applicable

**Winter interest:** no special winter interest

**Outstanding plant:** plant has outstanding ornamental features and could be planted more

**Pest resistance:** very sensitive to one or more pests or diseases which can affect plant health or aesthetics

## Use and Management

As plants age and become somewhat woody near the base of the plant, cut them back to stimulate new growth near the bottom. This will help them look good for many years.

The best sites have exposure to sun or partial shade and almost any soil. Butterfly weed is slow to start growth in the spring. Mark its location in hardiness zones 8 and parts of 9 before the plant disappears in the winter to prevent damage

to easily injured dormant crowns. A deep root (taproot) reportedly makes transplanting difficult. Once established do not disturb butterfly weed unnecessarily. Occasional fertilization can help keep flowers coming nearly all year long.

## Design Considerations

The thin stems and widely spaced leaves of the butterfly weed give a slightly weedy appearance (hence the name), so most gardeners mix them with shorter plants where the bright red and yellow flowers can be easily seen above the ground cover. The leaves can be stripped by caterpillars and the plant often looks stick-like at certain times of the year so using ground cover also helps hide the bare stems until they can be cut back. Pair with plants with large foliage and mounding or loose spreading forms to help the butterfly weed poke through the plants. White or purple flowers are complementary colors to yellow and red, which will contrast nicely.

## Pests and Diseases

Aphids may infest butterfly weed.

Leaf spot diseases are seen but not serious.

Rusts cause the formation of reddish-colored spots.

Cucumber mosaic virus causes leaf mottling, but no chemical control is available.