Florida Native Plant Society

Native Plant Owners Manual

Asclepias humistrata – Sandhill Milkweed

Mark Hutchinson
Putting things in perspective

All seasonal references are applicable to the eastern panhandle of Hernando County where the plants portrayed in this presentation grow. This area happens to be a cold spot in central Florida due to the Brooksville Ridge and approximates a Hardiness Zone of 8a or 8b, average annual low temperatures ranging between 10 and 20 °F.

Any reference to medicinal or culinary use of plants or plant parts should in no way be considered an endorsement by the Florida Native Plant Society of any sort of experimentation or consumptive use.

Please do not attempt to rescue any native plants without first reviewing the [FNPS Policy on Transplanting Native Plants](#)

Special thanks to Lucille Lane, Shirley Denton, Kari Ruder and Brooke Martin
Sandhill Milkweed
Milkweed family
Asclepias humistrata
What's in a Name?

Biological Classification – Tree of Life

Where does this plant grow?
  • In North America
  • In Florida

What this plant needs to -
  • Thrive
  • Pollinate
  • Propagate

Life Cycle

References
Pinewoods Milkweed, sandhill milkweed, purple milkweed, pink-veined milkweed, creeping milkweed

*Asclepias* (ass - KLE - pee - us)

Named for Asklepios, the god of medicine and healing in Greek mythology

*Humistrata* (hew - mi - STRAY - tuh)

From the Latin ‘*humis,*’ meaning ground, and ‘*sternere,*’ to spread, referring to low sprawling nature
Biological and Genetic Relationships

Asclepias humistrata - Walter - pinewoods milkweed
Asclepias L. - milkweed
Apocynaceae (milkweed family)
  Loganiaceae
  Gentianaceae (gentian family)
  Gelsemiaceae
  Rubiaceae (coffee family)

Each species is a leaf on the Tree of Life. Its genetic connections can be explored by following the branches (red line), towards the roots of life.
(All extinct branches have been excluded for clarity.)
eudicots (most flowering plants)

Nymphaeaceae
(water lilies and relatives)

Austrobaileyales

Monocotyledons
(lilies, orchids, palms, grasses & relatives)

Ceratophylliaceae

Chloranthaceae

magnoloids

Amborella trichopoda

(Individual species and genus denoted by italics)
Link to the University of Arizona’s Tree of Life.
Sandhill Milkweed, native to North America, is endemic to the southeastern United States from a couple of parishes in eastern Louisiana to a few counties in southern North Carolina.

(For specific distribution within any of the shaded areas go to the USDA link provided on the reference page, and click the shaded area of interest.)
• The United States Department of Agriculture, NRCS, lists a total of sixty-six species of the genus *Asclepias* L. throughout the U.S.

• The Atlas of Florida Vascular Plants identifies 22 species occurring in Florida, 21 of which are native.

R.K. Godfrey Herbarium (FSU) #178692 Pasco Co., 10/14/1980
Species Distribution within Florida

• A herbaceous perennial native to central Florida and the panhandle, Pinewoods Milkweed is *vouchered in approximately forty-five Florida counties.

• *Asclepias humistrata* prefers Sandy Flat Pine Woods, Sandhill, and Scrub habitats.

(*vouchered – indicates that a fully documented dried specimen has been deposited in an approved herbarium)*
Plant Structure and Life Cycle

When this herbaceous perennial first emerges after winter, it is readily recognizable by the prominently veined elliptical to ovate opposing leaves.

This is a larval host plant and is oftentimes devoured at this tender stage. The resulting caterpillars and butterfly may be protected by the milkweed’s chemistry.
Purple Milkweed is normally found in sandhill and scrub habitats, areas susceptible to wildfire. During a fire, most of the low laying plant life and ground cover will be burnt away. The plant has evolved a thick tap root system that runs deep, aiding in rapid recovery from fire. Depending on its age, a typical taproot may run as deep as 12 inches and be an inch in diameter.
As the plant matures, the soft green color of its leaves darkens to a purple/green-to-mauve color, while the ovate shaped leaves develop an acute tip.
The white-to-lavender colored hermaphroditic flowers attract many pollinators: butterflies, wasps, and shield bugs. Pollination in this genus is unusual; pollen is contained in sacs stored in the slits of the flower, as pollinators walk across the flower head these sacs attach to the feet or mouth parts of the creature, being pulled free as the insect moves. Pollination is achieved by reversing this process on the next plant visited.
Pollination results in follicles, the erect fruit on drooping pedicels which form in late May and early June. The follicles remain closed until the seeds are mature.
As the follicle dries and splits, the membrane holding the seeds arches out, exposing them to the sun and wind. Drying releases white silky pappus that aid the wind in seed dispersal.
Growing Conditions

- Full sun to slight shade

- *A. humistrata* prefers well-drained sandy soil.
- Acid to slightly alkaline soil – 5.1 to 7.5pH
- Good drought tolerance
- Hardiness: USDA Zone 3a: to -39.9 °C (-40 °F)
  to USDA Zone 8b: to -9.4 °C (15 °F)
- Flowering and seed production occur between April and June
- Height: 18-24 inch (45-60 cm)
Pollinators and Wildlife

Asclepias humistrata is host plant to both the Monarch butterfly, Danaus plexippus (see picture), and the Queen butterfly, Danaus gilippus. It is believed that the caterpillar and the butterfly that follows may be protected by the milkweed chemicals absorbed while feeding.
Seed Collecting and Propagation

Seeds can be collected easily by placing a mesh bag (like those garlic is sold in), over the follicle before it opens and while it is still attached to the plant. Take care not to break the follicle or damage the plant. These seeds should be scarified by lightly rubbing them on fine sand paper prior to sowing in the late fall or early spring.

Root cuttings can be taken in the fall and early spring. Exposed root flesh should be dusted with rooting hormone and placed in very sandy soil. Keep moist, but not wet, in full sun.
Presentation References

• Biological and genetic relationships
  University of Arizona Tree of Life

• North American distribution
  USDA - Natural Resource Conservation Service

• Florida distribution
  Atlas of Florida Vascular Plants

• Herbarium specimen
  R.K.Godfrey Herbarium (FSU)

• Larval Food Source – Host Plants
  Biospherenursery.com
Presentation References (cont.)

- Growing conditions and general information
  
  Wikipedia genus *Asclepias*

  The Wildflower Center UTA

- FNPS – Natives for Landscaping
  
  FNPS.org This Link will take you to the profile for this plant on the FNPS website

- Florida Plants by zone and habitat, use your county name or zip-code to see native habitat classifications and appropriate plants.
• For more in-depth study:


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