

Milkweeds

by Sally Cureton

The side of Palmer and Nicklaus Roads right now are lined with dozens of Milkweed (*Asclepias lanceolata*) plants. You may have some in your neighborhoods too. They are about 2 feet high with white budding flowers. It is called Milkweed because when cut or broken the juice or sap is milky white. The scientific name, *Asclepias*, comes from Asklepias, the Greek god of medicine and healing. There are approximately 110 species of Milkweed in North America, in the form of herbs, shrubs and vines. The flowers form a central crown.

Milkweeds have a unique and complicated mechanism for pollination, relying on butterflies, moths, bees, ants and wasps. The pollen is contained in slits in the side of a central column. A minute mass of pollen will become attached to an insect when its leg enters a slit. When the insect visits another flower, the pollen must be left in exactly the right place for pollination to be successful. This may explain why so few fruits are found in the plants.

Some of the more common types of Milkweed in this area are Swamp Milkweed with a deep pink or white flower. It grows in swamps, shorelines and thickets. The plant known as Common Milkweed grows to be 4-10 feet tall with a purple to pink flower. One of the more widespread ones that many people have in their yards is known as Butterfly Weed. Another name for it is Orange Milkweed. It has small bright orange flowers and grows 2-6 feet tall. Butterfly Weed does not have the typical milky sap. Its tough root was chewed by Native Americans to treat pleurisy and other pulmonary ailments. They also used the fluffy seed as insulation for their moccasins. Early pioneers used the sap from Milkweed as a cure for warts and the dried empty seed pods were used for a time as Christmas tree decorations.