

Milkweed *Asclepias tuberosa* and other species



Nearly all members of the milkweed genus (*Asclepias*) are erect or spreading, perennial herbs with milky sap from thick rootstocks or rhizomes. Leaves opposite, whorled or rarely alternate, simple, linear to widely ovate, entire. Flowers borne in dense, often showy umbels, often white or greenish white but may also be red, orange, lavender, or pale green. Fruit, an elongated follicle splitting on one side and releasing many seeds topped with white, silky hairs that enable them

to be widely dispersed by the wind. The milkweed genus is found throughout the southern region; in fields, along roadsides and fence rows and in open woods, pastures, and waste places. [Inset: fruit of butterfly milkweed]

Toxicity

Various species of milkweeds have yielded resinoids, alkaloids, and glycosides. All parts of the plant are toxic, whether consumed green or dried in hay. Cattle, sheep, goats, horses, and poultry are all sensitive to the effects of milkweed. Consuming the toxic plant in the amount of 2 percent of body weight can cause symptoms.

Symptoms

Losses usually occur when animals are forced to graze the plant due to lack of other forage. Usual signs include staggering, depression, weakness, labored respiration, and dilated pupils. Animals go down and exhibit tetanic spasms before going into a coma and dying.

Treatment

Give laxatives and intravenous fluids.