

Another Look at Milkweeds

Weeding around a path the end of April, I noticed the plumb green leaves of the perennial butterfly weed, *Asclepias tuberosa*, emerging. It is in the wrong place but because it has a deep taproot it defies being moved. When those bright orange flowers are decorated with zebra swallowtails, any place is just fine!

Other members of the *Asclepias* family that move in without invitation are not such elegant garden plants but since the Monarch butterfly demands milkweeds, we allow them to remain. There are more than 100 species of *Asclepias* and they are being groomed by growers to be more attractive. The genus was named for Asklepios, the Greek god of healing and son of Apollo. Some species have a long history of being used to treat various ailments.

The spring shoots of one native to the Atlantic coastal area, *A. syriaca*, has been traditionally prized by wild food devotees. I have never trusted my ability to discern safe from sorry in the wild food department so my experience is limited to grown-for-food plants. This plant contains cardiac glycosides, allied to those in foxgloves (*Digitalis purpurea*). When absorbed by munching Monarch butterfly larva these glycosides make the larvae and adult butterflies toxic to birds and other predators.

Butterfly weed comes not only in orange but in an easier to mingle white and one called 'Mellow Yellow'. Orange is one of those colors that incites strong reaction. Lots of people love it and as many don't. It works in small amounts to jazz up a flower bed in danger of moving from familiar to boring. For hot hot days that seem to weary the cooler blues, lavenders and roses, it is the golds, yellows, and oranges that retain the energy to fight back.

A favorite of native plant enthusiasts is *A. incarnata*, the pink swamp milkweed. It prefers a moist spot as the name indicates but it will tolerate an average, well-drained garden site. It can stretch to five feet so doesn't belong in the front row. The clusters of midsummer flowers are pinkish but there is one 'Ice Ballet', a white swamp milkweed that brightens a full sun border and is a butterfly magnet.

Less hardy than the others is *A. curassavica* called blood flower, Indian root, and Swallow-wart. A native of Brazil, it is an evergreen sub-shrub often grown as an annual. It produces vivid red or orange-red flowers from June to autumn on three-foot stems. You might want one in a pot that could be brought into a sheltered spot for the winter?

Most milkweeds share the milky sap that can be an irritant to some people and they also share marvelous seedpods that are great in arrangements before they explode into a mass of silky feathered seeds. When those pods burst you understand the other common name for *Asclepias*, silk weed. This floss is said to be an even better insulator than goose down and I have read that it can be used with other fibers in

making cloth. Looking at this evasive fluff, one might think that an extremely taxing effort.

A Tribute: Gertrude Jekyll 1843-1932

Thwarted in her hopes of a career as a painter by eye problems, Gertrude Jekyll turned her artistic talents to gardening, to our great benefit. Raised an Edwardian Lady with a passion for nature, in an era of parks as landscape and matching yards of plotted pots, Miss Jekyll turned those habits upside down. In her designs, she emphasized subtle color contrasts and naturalistic plantings that displayed the grace of the plant itself.

This naturalism was not a rampant back-to-untamed-nature impulse but a natural use of plant material for an overall artistic effect in the disciplined spaces of gardens. Her use of graded colors in borders, moving from soft to bright and back to soft again over the length of the bed became her hallmark, winning her a host of clients. A Jekyll border was not static but changed as the changing seasons required additions and subtractions.

By working with plants agreeable to one another, she created spaces that were complete and distinct in themselves, not merely a part of a theme-less expanse. In our day, this influences the division of large gardens into garden 'rooms'. Actually, more than two thousand of Gertrude Jekyll's plans survive, from small details to entire gardens. One of her small designs was for the top of a garden shed! The shed was crowned with a drift of sedums. Surely, the more things change, the more they remain the same.

A REMINDER: The deadline for your application to become a master gardener is May 29. Download application at www.gloucesterva.info/ext/mastergardener/ or phone the Virginia Cooperative Extension office 693-2602