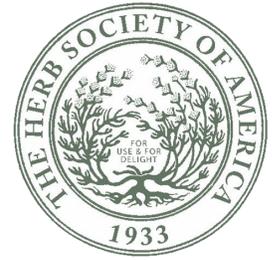


The Herb Society of America's Notable Native 2014 - retring milkweed

Asclepias variegata L.



Asclepias variegata, retring milkweed
All Photos: Kathy Schlosser

History

Linnaeus named the genus *Asclepias* for the Greek demi-god Asclepius, the physician, because of the folk medicinal usage of milkweed. The species name *variegata* is due to the reddish ring around the base of each flower. White milkweed is the more commonly used name, but the USDA uses retring milkweed based on this feature. Linnaeus published a description in his *Species Plantarum* of 1753, "floribus albis intis purpureis."

This species is endangered in Connecticut, New York, and Pennsylvania.

Description

Redring milkweed is an herbaceous perennial that derives its name from the showy terminal clusters of bicolored flowers in bloom from May to July.

Each white waxy flower has a reddish to purple or pink center that forms a ring at the base of the typical milkweed arrangement of horns and hoods. Dark green el-

liptical to ovate leaves range from 3 to 5 inches long and 1 to 3 inches wide, with opposite arrangement usually in 4 to 6 pairs per stem.

Generally non-branching, slender stems, which produce milky sap, can reach 3 feet in height. After floral pollination, pods (or follicles) form, which dehisce to disperse numerous seeds at maturity.

Culture

Redring milkweed's habitat includes sandy or rocky open woodlands, thickets, open slopes and ridges, savannas, and rocky streambanks. Native distribution extends through areas of Connecticut and New York south to Florida, and west to Illinois extending to Texas.

Although it is not widely grown in a garden setting, placement would be best in part shade to sun in a well-drained soil



ranging from sand to loam or clay-loam. Once established, this milkweed should be quite drought tolerant.

Propagation

Seed can be planted the season after harvest. Results shared by various gardeners show that spring planting after cold stratification, or cold/moist stratification, works well. Seed can be germinated indoors 6 to



8 weeks before planting date in a well-draining potting mix. Spring divisions or basal cuttings can also be made.

Uses

This milkweed attracts native and honey bees, butterflies, moths, hummingbirds, and beneficial insects that help control insect pests. Large mammals and birds infrequently use it as a food source.

In some areas of its range it might serve as a larval food plant for monarch butterflies.

Redring milkweed is perfect for natural, wildflower and butterfly gardens.

Some chemical substances of the milky sap of milkweeds are being examined for human medical uses.

Milkweeds are found through all of the U.S. except Alaska. There are more than 70 species, many of which had important historical uses such as medicine, food or fiber. Most of the milkweeds are important food plants for developing caterpillars of the monarch butterfly. Including species that are native to your region can make your garden an important part of promoting the future of these beautiful creatures.



Plant and Seed Sources

Plant Information Online is a source to links to North American seed and nursery firms. It is a free service of the University of Minnesota Libraries.
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