

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #67 answer: BUTTERFLY WEED (*Asclepias tuberosa*)

This generous native attracts a crowd. Bumblebees, honeybees, and butterflies—painted ladies, fritillaries, hairstreaks, pipevine swallowtails, and more—feast on its copious nectar. The ruby-throated hummingbird does too. The leaves feed larvae of queen butterflies and monarch butterflies and of several moths—the dogbane tiger moth, milkweed tussock moth, and the unexpected cynthia (which prefers this plant above all others). As they feed, bees and wasps push clumps of pollen, called *pollinia*, into a chamber in the stigma. Even so, pollination is dicey: there is low seed set, and if a plant’s own pollen gets there first, the seeds abort.

All our milkweeds lately moved from their own family into the dogbane family, the Apocynaceae. Typical of this family is milky sap with sticky latex and cardiac glycosides, which protect the plant and whatever insect survives eating it from predation. Butterfly weed is the exception: its sap is clear, and it contains a smaller amount of toxin. This may be why, despite the name, fewer monarchs lay eggs on it than on other milkweeds.

Butterfly weed also stands apart from other milkweeds in its flaming orange color. Look in meadow or field for stiff, lance-shaped leaves arranged in a spiral around a hairy stem, and later for long seed pods shaped like narrow spindles. Admire the thick cluster of up to 25 flowers, but resist any temptation to transplant; *tuberosa* means tube-rooted, and these thick, knobby roots are often several feet deep.

The genus name comes from Asclepias, the Greek god of medicine, so you would expect healing properties. Native peoples and European settlers boiled butterfly weed’s thick roots to make a bitter medicine for respiratory illness, yielding the name “pleurisy root”. They also took the *coma*—the silky, wax-coated down attached to its brown seeds—and spun it to make wicks for candles.

WILDFLOWER #68

Clues: Small white flowers corkscrew up a slender wand.



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