

## WVNPS's Featured Flower of the Quarter

### Butterfly weed

*Asclepias tuberosa*

**About Butterfly weed:** Butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*) is a member of the milkweed family (Asclepiadaceae). This familiar orange milkweed is found in dry fields and open spaces throughout West Virginia. Butterfly weed is a coarse perennial forb consisting of many stems. The stems are straight and very hairy. The leaves are alternate and simple. Unlike other species of milkweed, butterfly weed does not contain the characteristic of thick milky sap, but instead has a watery translucent sap. The inflorescence is slightly rounded to flat and made up of many individual flowers. The flower consists of five petals pointing down and topped by a crown of five erect hoods. The fruit is a pod containing numerous brown seed each with a tuft of silky white hairs.

**Species of Butterfly weed:** Throughout West Virginia, there are two different species that vary by the location of the widest part of the leaves. In *ssp interior*, the widest part is below the middle of the leaf, while in *spp tuberosa* it is widest above the middle. *Spp interior* is found in 3 current and 15 old counties and *spp tuberosa* has 8 current and 31 old records.

**Historical Uses:** Native Americans harvested fibers from the dried stems of this plant for rope-making and weaving cloth. Many tribes used various parts of the butterfly weed as food. In colonial America, dried leaves of butterfly weed were made into a tea to treat chest inflammation giving butterfly weed an alternative name: pleurisy root. Pleurisy root was listed in the American Pharmacopoeia and the National Formulary until 1936.



*Asclepias tuberosa spp. interior*  
Photo: fs.fed.us, 2010

**Why So Important?** Milkweeds are vital to our ecosystem because they are the host plant for monarch butterflies (*Danaus plexippus*). The entire lifecycle of monarch butterflies, from caterpillars to adults, revolves around this plant. Monarch butterfly caterpillars feed upon its leaves to obtain needed toxins to detract predators, particularly birds. Milkweeds, also, provide an excellent source of nectar for several other butterflies and insects.

**Remember to check out the next  
“Featured Flower of the Quarter”!**