

HOW TO GROW MILKWEED

Introduction

Milkweeds can be propagated from seeds, cuttings, and, in some cases, from root divisions. This account will deal with storage, treatment and planting of milkweeds seeds and will briefly touch on propagation from cuttings.

Milkweed seeds can be planted in prepared beds outdoors or started indoors in flats. We recommend the latter approach since germination rates are generally higher indoors and it is easier to establish your milkweeds with transplanted seedlings that are well-rooted and therefore more resistant to weather extremes and pests.

Germinating, Growing and Transplanting

Milkweed seedlings can be started indoors in a greenhouse or under artificial lighting and then transplanted outdoors after the average date of last frost. If seeds are started indoors, allow 4-8 weeks growing time before transplanting. Plastic flats can be used to start the seeds. Fill the flats with a soil mix suitable for seedlings (most potting mixes are), thoroughly soak the soil, and let the excess water drain. Sow the seeds by scattering them on the soil surface 1/4-1/2 inch apart, and then cover with about 1/4 inch of additional soil mix. Gently mist the soil surface with water to dampen the additional soil mix that has been added. In an effort to improve germination rates, many gardeners place the seeds in packets made from paper towels and soak them in warm water for 24 hours prior to planting. This method seems to work especially well for seeds of species that require stratification.

After the seeds are sown in the flats, cover each flat with a clear plastic cover or a plastic bag to keep the seeds from drying out while germinating. Then, place the flat under grow lights, in a warm sunny window, or in a greenhouse. Most seeds will germinate in 7-10 days if the flats are maintained at 75°F. After the seeds have germinated, remove the plastic covering from the flats. Once the seedlings have emerged, the soil should be kept moist by watering the flat from the bottom. You can water from the bottom by placing the flat in a sink or a larger flat filled with 2 inches of water until moisture appears on the soil surface. The soil should be kept moist but some care is needed to keep the seedlings from getting too wet - such conditions contribute to fungal growth that can kill the young seedlings ("damping off"). Thinning (see below) can reduce damping off.

The plants are ready to be transplanted when they are about 3-6 inches in height. Before transplanting, acclimate the plants to outdoor conditions for a few days by placing them in a sheltered location during the day and then bringing them indoors at night. The seedlings should be planted 6-24 inches apart depending on the species (check the back of your seed packets for information). Newly transplanted plants should be watered frequently. Add mulch around the seedlings soon after planting. The mulch holds in the moisture and minimizes the

growth of competing weeds. The seedlings should be fertilized 2-3 times during the growing season if using water-soluble fertilizer or once a season if you utilize a granulated time-release formulation.

When to Plant

Milkweed seeds can be sown outdoors after the danger of frost has passed. Refer to the seed packets for special instructions on sowing the seeds. Keep in mind that seeds have a range of soil temperatures at which they will germinate. Also, remember that under sunny conditions the soil temperatures can be much higher in the daytime than the ambient air temperatures you experience. Plant the seeds early since those planted late in the season may not germinate because of high temperatures. In addition, new seedlings from late plantings can "dry off" before they are even noticed. *Asclepias incarnata* (swamp milkweed) and *A. syriaca* (common milkweed) germinate poorly at high temperatures (>85°F). However, other species such as *A. curassavica* (tropical milkweed) and *Cynanchum laeve* (blue vine) germinate well at these temperatures. Germination outdoors depends on soil moisture and temperature and could take several weeks if conditions are not ideal.

Preparation of the Seedbed

If you are gardening for the first time, it is wise to consult with your local county extension agent to see if your soil needs to be enhanced (amended) with soil additives before planting the seeds.

A smooth, clump-free, weeded soil bed will virtually guarantee a successful start for germination and seedling establishment. If vegetation exists in the future habitat location, it can be removed by using a tiller or by hoeing the area. To reduce clumping, do not work the soil when it is wet. The soil should be worked to a fine consistency to ensure good soil to seed contact.

The seedbed should be kept moist until germination. As the seedlings become established, it is important to avoid watering too much or too little. A light watering each day until roots are well established (7-10 days), preferably in the morning, should be sufficient.

For small amounts of seeds to be planted follow below:

IMPORTANT NOTE: Germination rates will be greatly reduced if not planted correctly! Milkweed seeds can be very slow to germinate and does take some time and patience. For best results and to speed up the germination process, place the seeds in wet paper towels in a plastic bag in the refrigerator for 30 days prior to planting. Then plant the seeds in a sunny place about 1/2" deep and water them for at least two weeks.

PLEASE NOTE:

At some point during the summer milkweed plants will attract a few bugs including the orange aphids, at first there will be just a few and then they'll multiply like no other bugs. The best way to keep them under control is a daily spray dish soap and water. (2 TBSP of any dish soap x 4 Lt. of water) It will kill them without any harm to the plant.