

Milkweed Family

204 species in the *Asclepias* genus

Common Names: The most toxic milkweed species is labriform milkweed. Mexican whorled milkweed, western whorled milkweed, and woollypod milkweed are also toxic. Butterfly weed is a kind of milkweed. Of these types, only Mexican whorled milkweed is found in Washington state.

Species Affected: Dogs, chickens, turkeys, rabbits, horses, cattle, sheep, and goats (mammals are more affected than birds)

Description: Across 204 species, milkweeds can vary greatly in their appearance, but some general identification guidelines are as follows: leaves are typically large, oblong, and alternately-arranged along the stem. Stems are typically upright and sturdy (although a few species exhibit a vining growth habit). The stems usually contain a milky sap, hence the common name, milkweed. Flowers have a distinctive five-petaled shape (see photos) and are arranged in clusters, but vary widely in color by species. Seeds form in elongated pods, which split open upon maturity, leaving noticeable silky fibers behind.

Growing Location: Milkweeds are found in sandy soils, often in disturbed areas such as fallow fields, rangelands, roadsides, ditches, and overgrazed pastures.

Toxin: Milkweeds may be either whorled or nonwhorled, which refers to the arrangement of the leaves on the stem and whether they grow in a spiral-like pattern. Nonwhorled milkweeds are generally more highly toxic than whorled ones, because they contain higher concentrations of cardenolides (toxic glycosidic substances). However, whorled milkweeds still contain some level of cardenolides and are also thought to contain an unidentified neurotoxin.

Toxic Plant Parts: Aboveground plant parts are usually responsible for poisonings, but roots may also contain toxic components. Ingestion of as little as 0.05% of an animal's bodyweight can result in poisoning.

Possible Effects on Livestock: Symptoms may include elevated temperature, rapid/weak pulse, difficulty breathing, dilated pupils, bloat, gastroenteritis, loss of muscle control, violent spasms, staggering gait, and organ necrosis/congestion.

Preventative Measures: As with any pasture/rangeland weed, good land management is key. Animals will typically not eat milkweeds unless other forage is unavailable. Avoid baling hay containing milkweed and/or feeding contaminated hay.

Resources: [Milkweed \(Asclepias spp.\) : USDA ARS](#)

[Milkweed Poisoning in Dogs - Symptoms, Causes, Diagnosis, Treatment, Recovery, Management, Cost \(wagwalking.com\)](#)

[Milkweed \(Ornamental Plants Toxic to Animals\) – Wisconsin Horticulture](#)

[Are all Milkweeds dangerous to livestock? | OSU Extension Service \(oregonstate.edu\)](#)



Eastern whorled milkweed flower (Source: Clemson University)



Swamp milkweed (source: Bowman's Hill Wildlife Preserve)



Whorled milkweed (Source: gobotany.org)