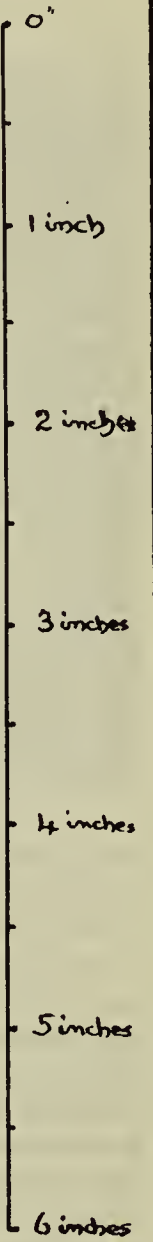


CARRION FLOWER (Stapelia)

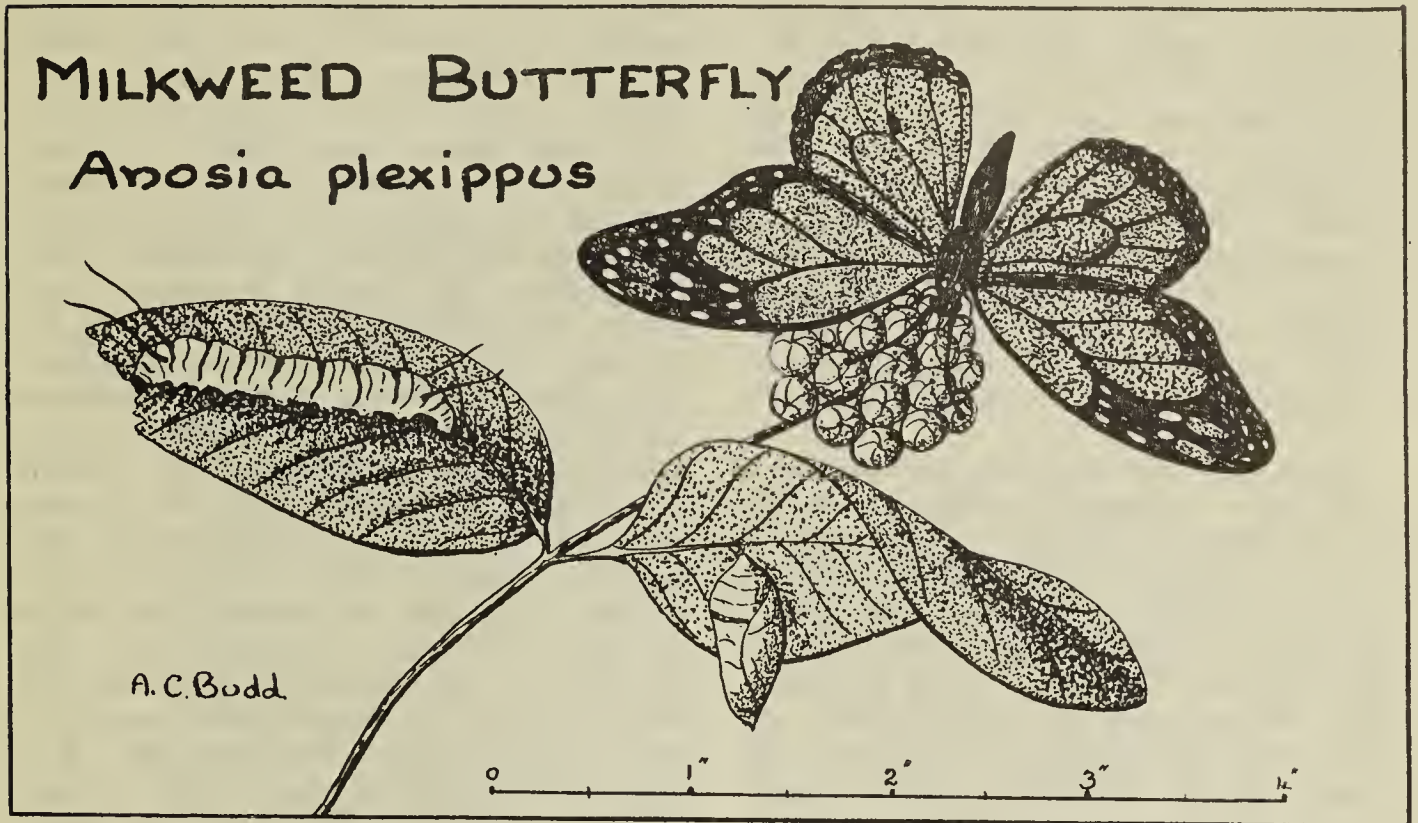
Scale



MILKWEED.

Asclepias speciosa

A.C. Budd.



The Milkweeds and their Guests

By ARCH C. BUDD, Swift Current, Saskatchewan

Our common Showy Milkweeds are perennial plants growing to a height of two and a half feet, with broad, oval, opposite leaves, covered with a whitish down, and the stems and leaves give a milky, acid sap when broken or torn. The inflorescence is in the form of large, globose umbels up to three inches across of purplish to flesh-colored flowers, each about half an inch across.

These plants have many peculiarities, one being the strange dumb-bell shaped pollinia or pollen masses which become fastened to the legs of bumble-bees or large insects and thus carried to other plants to effect cross-pollination. Smaller insects, unsuited to carry the pollinia, are often caught in these pollen masses and starve to death when unable to escape. Milkweeds also have a powerful and rather pleasant odour which has quite a soporific effect and will produce drowsiness in humans in the same manner as the wolf-willow flowers. Quite frequently one finds, under the milkweed clumps, many insects in a somewhat dazed and dopey condition, whether caused by the soporific odour or from an overindulgence in the nectar it is hard to say. We used to call these plants "bees' beer parlors" for this reason.

The milky sap has corrosive properties and will sometimes destroy warts if applied frequently. The purpose of this sap is apparently to discourage smaller crawling insects from climbing up and taking nectar without effecting cross-pollination, as their feet puncture the stem which exudes sap. The sticky sap adhering to their feet soon renders further climbing impossible.

Another peculiarity are the large follicles or seed pods, which are from three to four inches long, whitish woolly, with soft tubercles. These split up one side at maturity releasing the numerous brown seeds, each of which bears a coma or tuft of silky, white hairs to assist in dissemination. This "milkweed floss" was collected during the war for use as a "kapok" substitute in life saving jackets. Early writers told that the Indians used this silky floss to fill their beds and it was referred to as "Virginia silk". They also related that Indians gathered the flowers in the morning when covered with dew and made a sugar from them. The young shoots of some species were eaten like asparagus, we are told.

Several species of milkweed are found on our prairies, the commonest being Showy Milkweed (*Asclepias speciosa* Torr.). The generic

name originates from its fancied medicinal value, Asclepios being the Greek god of medicine, (Aesculapius of the Romans). All members of this family have a white, milky sap and it contains some peculiar members, among which are the Stapelias or Carrion-flowers, greenhouse plants much resembling cacti but bearing purplish-brown and yellow flowers with a foul odour of decaying meat to attract flies for cross-pollination.

There are several insects associated with the milkweed, amongst them the Milkweed Bugs, (Lygaeidae), but the most interesting is the Milkweed Butterfly (*Anosia plexippus*) sometimes called the Monarch or Black-veined Brown. This is a handsome insect with a wing spread of three and a half to four inches, orange brown in colour with black veins and black wing-tips spotted with white. The larvae (caterpillars) grow to about an inch and three quarters long, and are yellowish green in colour with narrow black stripes and bear conspicuous pairs of black filaments at either end of the

body. These wiggle excitedly when danger threatens to scare and ward off the intruders. They feed practically exclusively on milkweed foliage and later turn into a green chrysalis suspended from the underside of the leaf and bearing a black and gold line around the centre. The butterflies are great migrants and come into Canada from the U.S.A., laying their eggs as they proceed northwards and in the fall migrate back southwards again. In their migrations they sometimes are found in such great numbers as to appear in swarms of many thousands in the Southern States. They have been observed to settle on vessels as much as 300 miles out at sea and are also found in the Canary Islands off North Africa, probably the result of some individuals crossing the Atlantic. A few have been taken on the Welsh coast of Britain after Atlantic storms which gives them the name Storm Butterfly sometimes in England. The males are easily distinguished from the females by the presence of a black scent pouch near the centre of the hind wings.

New Look on the School Road

Mrs. J. HUBBARD, Grenfell, Sask.

Blue and gold have been the colours of Fall in Saskatchewan for many years with the emphasis on the gold, and our road to school has been no exception. When the Sowthistle faded out Goldenrod took over with patches of blue and white Aster for contrast.

But the last two years Fall colours have changed from the solid blue of the Smooth Aster and the yellow of Goldenrods to a symphony of blended pink, mauve, white, lilac and purple. Instead of two species of Aster (the blue Smooth Aster and the white Many-flowered) we have at least half a dozen.

Along the edge of the road for two miles they grow, thru the ditches and up on the grassy sides in a multitude of subtle shades that can hardly be called truly prairie. I suspect the high water level of the last few years of having something to do with the change in the colour scheme.

I make no claims for the accuracy of my identifications but after much head scratching and scrutiny I have

come up with the following as growing along this two miles of road:

Smooth Aster, *Aster laevis* L. Our common blue Aster of years past.

Tall White Aster, *Aster paniculatus* Lam. This comes in both white and a lovely pinky mauve to make identification more difficult, and truly lives up to its title of "tall". Must have been at least five feet tall in some of the deeper ditches.

Purple-stemmed Aster, *Aster puniceus* L.

Many-flowered Aster, *Aster eriocoides* L. This tough little Aster so common in dry years has been almost swamped by the wet-year asters.

Osterhout's Aster, *Aster Osterhoutii* Rydb. This Aster with pale pink or white flowers grows in the ditches beside our driveway.

Long-leaved Aster, *Aster longifolius* Lam.

I've also found the Willow Aster here but not this year. Some of these Asters were still blooming into October.