Is Common Milkweed Native to Georgia, How Do We Know, and Why Should We Care?

Linda Chafin and Ellen Honeycutt

What is a native plant species? That may sound like an easy question, and a typical answer sounds pretty straightforward: "A plant is native if it has occurred naturally for thousands of years in a region, ecosystem, or habitat without human introduction." (National Wildlife Federation 2025). For plants in North America, the typical answer is that a plant species is native if it was "here" before Europeans arrived in 1492. But that answer raises other questions, beginning with, what do we mean by "here"—the New World? The North American continent? The United States? A certain state? An ecoregion, such as the Southeastern Piedmont? Or a certain habitat type, such as mountain bogs or Longleaf Pine woodlands? And if we let "here" be a politically defined entity, such as a state, does the state boundary matter if a plant is found on one side of a state line but not a few miles away in an adjacent state? And what if the plant is documented in a state but only in artificial or human-disturbed settings, such as gardens or roadsides?

Below we consider these questions regarding a particular species, Common Milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*). Milkweeds have received a lot of attention because of their critical importance to the life cycle of Monarch butterflies, a species that has been proposed for listing as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. As of 2022, there were about 100 milkweed species in North and Central America (Weakley et al. 2022 [PDF version]). Among gardeners who wish to help Monarchs migrating through and laying eggs in Georgia, there is confusion about which of these species are most appropriate for native plant gardens in Georgia.

A Case in Point: Common Milkweed

Common Milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*) is called common for good reason: it is widespread in eastern North America, even flourishing as a roadside weed in some New England and Midwestern states. Although Linnaeus published the name in 1753 based on the erroneous belief that the specimen he had before him came from the Middle East (hence, *syriaca*), there is no question about its nativity in North America. It has been documented in nearly every state east of the Rocky Mountains and it has never been found in natural habitats in the Middle East. Range maps found across the internet, including *Flora of the Southeastern U.S.* (Weakley et al. 2025 [web app]), *Biota of North America Program* (BONAP 2014), and *USDA Plants* (2025), may indicate the states and even the counties where Common Milkweed has been documented. But do these range maps tell the whole story? Here's where we have to address the question of "how do we know?"

Common Milkweed dominating a roadside right-of-way in Minnesota. *Peter Dziuk*

How do botanists decide which species are native where and which are not? Historically, the most important sources of information for determining nativity are herbarium records. An herbarium is a kind of library or museum of preserved plant specimens that have been collected from the wild (usually) and affixed to a sheet of archival paper along with a label. The label is almost as important as the plant specimen itself. It includes the species name and as much information about the specimen and its habitat as can be squeezed onto a small square of paper. A specimen and its label are the field botanist's equivalent of a bench scientist's lab notes, and is proof that the observer saw that species on that date in that location in the described condition, data that are essential to determining the species range and nativity. On the right is a specimen label for Common Milkweed collected in Cobb County by Wendy Zomlefer in 2006.

For most common species, such as Common Milkweed, there are many specimens on deposit in more than one herbarium. This is true for Common Milkweed in many states but not all. In some southern states, and we'll focus on Georgia here, there are very few herbarium specimens and nearly all were collected in the last 40 years. Common Milkweed is not included in *The Distribution of the Vascular Flora of Georgia* (Jones and Coile 1988), which includes native plants as well as exotic plants that occur in native habitats. Jones and Coile's range maps are based almost entirely on herbarium records. Later that same year, Steve Broyles and Robert Wyatt discovered a population of 25 flowering Common Milkweed plants growing along a railroad in Barrow County, Georgia, about 35 miles northeast of Athens. Five years later, Dr. Wyatt and three colleagues published a paper about Common Milkweed's spread into southern states with this summary: "Common Milkweed is rapidly expanding its range southward. It occurs abundantly in the southern Piedmont of North Carolina and has recently been collected from Cherokee County in the northern Piedmont of South Carolina. [It] has also been collected from four counties in the Piedmont, Ridge and Valley, and Cumberland Plateau regions of northern Georgia."

A search of the database maintained by the Southeast Regional Network of Expertise and Collections (SERNEC) in August 2025 revealed ten herbarium specimens of Common Milkweed known from Georgia (Table 1). SERNEC compiles specimen information from 233 herbaria in 14 states; these specimens of Common Milkweed were found in only three of these herbaria (SERNEC 2025).

How Should We Interpret Herbarium Data for Common Milkweed in Georgia?

First, let's consider historical factors. European and colonial plant explorers and observers were documenting Georgia's flora soon after the establishment of Georgia as a colony. None reported Common Milkweed, a large, showy plant that would not be easily overlooked. It was first documented in Georgia in 1917 and not again until 1973. It has not been documented by herbarium specimens nor reported in anecdotal accounts in Georgia since 2006.

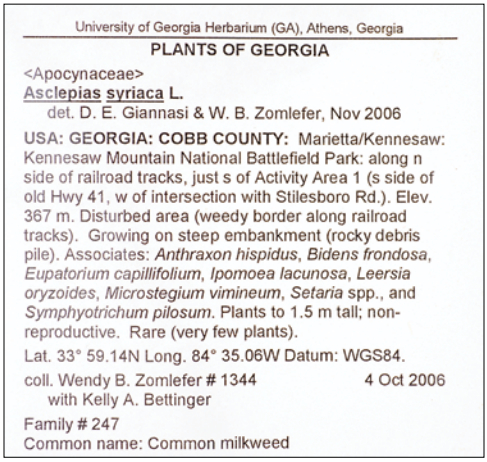
Common Milkweed in fruit on a Michigan roadside in September *Linda Chafin*

Second, consider the sites where the specimens were collected. In every instance, the plants were documented in a human-disturbed site, usually along a well traveled thoroughfare.

Third, let's consider the biology of the species. Wyatt et al. (1993) wrote: "Reasons for the rapid spread of this native plant are unclear, but it does possess strong colonizing potential due to its numerous comose [plumed] seeds, gemmiferous [bud-bearing] roots, and limited self-compatibility. It is possible that wind dispersal of seeds is enhanced by drafting off of large, high-speed trucks along interstate highways." We would add that seeds lodged in car tires and undercarriages of railroad cars could also be carried long distances. Our interpretation of these data is that Common Milkweed is a relatively recent arrival in Georgia, brought here not by natural means (wind, animals) but by human activity, that has not yet become established in our natural habitats.

Herbarium data are frequently used by botanists to create range maps that indicate the regions, states, provinces, or counties where a given species has been documented (at least, that's the case in North America; we don't have experience elsewhere). Figure 1 is a map of Common Milkweed distribution posted online by BONAP that indicates a total of six counties in Georgia with Common Milkweed occurrences: Bartow, Cobb, Dade, Fulton, Clarke, and Murray. Right away, you'll see that some counties for which there are herbarium specimens in SERNEC (Table 1) were omitted from this map and that the map-maker apparently misread "Barrow County" as "Bartow County." And way down in southeast Georgia is Charlton County, for which there are no herbarium specimens that we know of, which is colored yellow. The

Common Milkweed mature fruit releasing seeds *Ryan Hodnett, Wikimedia Commons*



University of Georgia Herbarium (GA), Athens, Georgia

PLANTS OF GEORGIA

<Apocynaceae>
Asclepias syriaca L.
det. D. E. Giannasi & W. B. Zomlefer, Nov 2006

USA: GEORGIA: COBB COUNTY: Marietta/Kennesaw: Kennesaw Mountain National Battlefield Park: along n side of railroad tracks, just s of Activity Area 1 (s side of old Hwy 41, w of intersection with Stilesboro Rd.). Elev. 367 m. Disturbed area (weedy border along railroad tracks). Growing on steep embankment (rocky debris pile). Associates: *Anthraxon hispidus*, *Bidens frondosa*, *Eupatorium capillifolium*, *Ipomoea lacunosa*, *Leersia oryzoides*, *Microstegium vimineum*, *Setaria* spp., and *Symphyotrichum pilosum*. Plants to 1.5 m tall; non-reproductive. Rare (very few plants).

Lat. 33° 59.14N Long. 84° 35.06W Datum: WGS84.

coll. Wendy B. Zomlefer # 1344 4 Oct 2006
with Kelly A. Bettinger

Family # 247
Common name: Common milkweed

Herbarium label for Common Milkweed collected in Cobb County, Georgia.

key that accompanies the BONAP maps tells us that a species shown in a dark green county is "present and native" and that a yellow county means the "species is present and rare."

Figure 2 is a map from the USDA Plants Database (2025) for the same species. Most states throughout the species range have counties with documented populations colored dark green. States where the species is considered native but for which there are no county data are colored pale green, including Georgia. This is odd since there are ten herbarium specimens per SERNEC (Table 1).

And, finally, here is a range map, Figure 3, for Common Milkweed from the *Flora of the Southeastern United States* project (Weakley et al. 2025). The two hollow triangles in Georgia indicate that the mapmaker believes that this species is an exotic that occurs in Georgia's Piedmont and mountains (defined as Cumberland Plateau, Ridge & Valley, and Blue Ridge ecoregions). The asterisk in the Coastal Plain indicates that the plant is an "exotic waif" (a botanical "waif" is a non-native plant that does not persist in the wild for more than one or a few years), possibly referring to Charlton County plants.

How should we understand these divergent maps? The best we can say is that there is disagreement among experts about how to interpret the herbarium data and that more data, based on field surveys, are needed to clarify the status of Common Milkweed in Georgia.

Does a State Border Matter?

How much does a state border matter? The county range maps shown above place Com-

Possible hybrid between Common Milkweed and Butterfly Milkweed in West Virginia, July 2025
Steve Mace

Collection Date	County	Habitat given on herbarium label
1988, May 31	Barrow	Between Hwy 29 and railroad
1983, July 13	Clarke	None given
2006, October 4	Cobb	Weedy border along railroad tracks
1917 [not given]	Dade	Near road
1991, August 8	Dade	Rocky soil along farm road
1973, May 16	Floyd	Dry field along Cave Springs Road
1992, June 6	Fulton	Vacant lot, corner of Peachtree Rd and Highland Dr
1973, June 10	Gordon	Roadside bank
1992, July 24	Murray	West side of U.S. Hwy 411
1996, July 25	Rabun	Disturbed old garden area

Table 1. Ten herbarium specimens of Common Milkweed that were collected in Georgia.

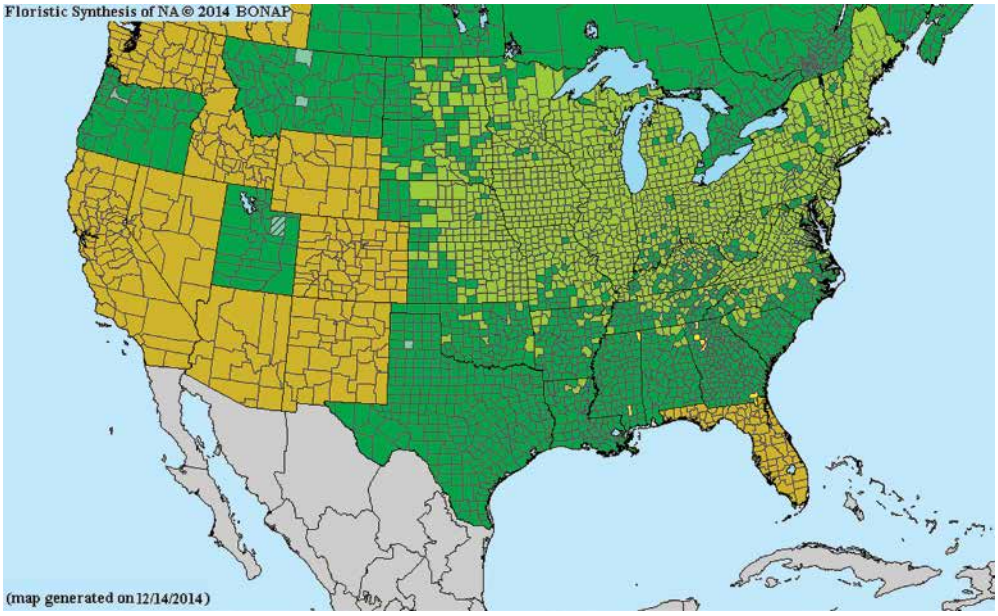


Figure 1. Common Milkweed distribution shown in Biota of North America Program.

mon Milkweed in many counties in the Piedmont and Blue Ridge of North Carolina and Virginia, two ecoregions that extend south into Georgia. It also occurs in two North Carolina counties that border north Georgia. Alabama county range maps show Common Milkweed occurring in three counties adjacent to Georgia's Cumberland Plateau and Ridge & Valley ecoregions (Keener et al. 2025). Referring again to the National Wildlife Federation definition that "A plant is native if it has occurred naturally for thousands of years in a region, ecosystem, or habitat without human introduction," it is clear that Common Milkweed is native to *regions* that include Georgia.

Why Does It Matter if Common Milkweed Is Native to Georgia?

The question of Common Milkweed's nativity in Georgia has arisen because of the dire situation confronting Monarch butterflies (the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has proposed that Monarchs be listed as Threatened) and the desire of native plant gardeners to help by planting milkweeds, the Monarch's larval host plants. Shouldn't we be doing everything possible to support this imperiled species of butterfly, including planting Common Milkweed in our gardens? What are the most important factors that determine the milkweed species we should plant?

Does its relatively recent arrival in Georgia disqualify it as a native Georgia species that should not be planted in our native gardens? Does its association with disturbed sites and human transport rather than natural habitats and modes of dispersal disqualify it? Are there currently unknown biological reasons that Common Milkweed's presence in Georgia could actually have negative consequences for Monarchs, such as delaying their migration to Mexico or affecting their susceptibility to infections? Couldn't Monarchs be helped instead by increased planting of known, fairly common natives such as Swamp Milkweed, Butterfly Milkweed, Whorled Milkweed, Smooth-seed Milkweed, Clasping Milkweed, and Sandhills Milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata, A. tuberosa, A. verticillata, A. perennis, A. amplexicaulis,* and *A. humistrata*)?

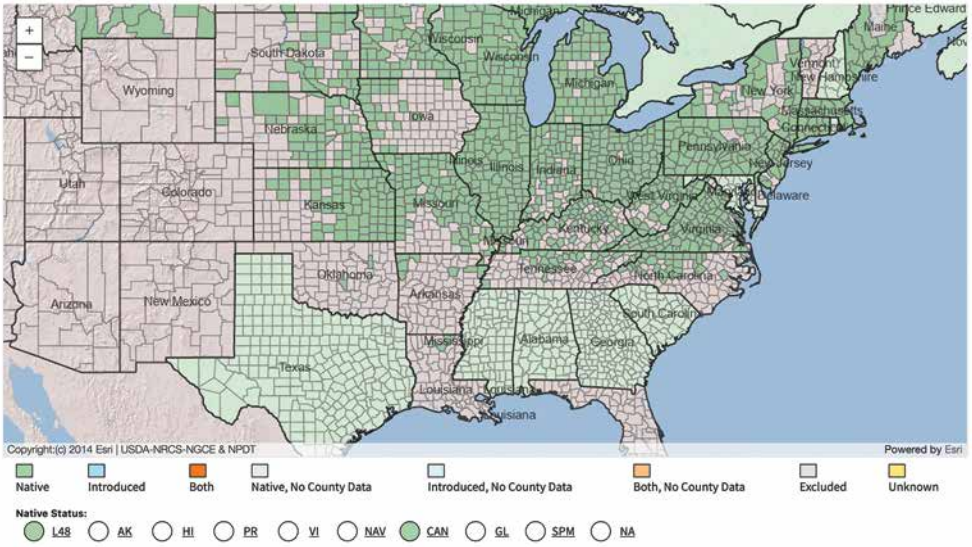


Figure 2. Common Milkweed distribution map, USDA Plants Database.

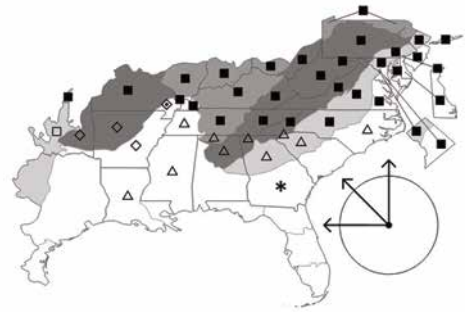


Figure 3. Common Milkweed distribution shown in the *Flora of the Southeastern U.S. app*.

Are there any negative effects on Georgia's native plant communities caused by the cultivation of Common Milkweed in our gardens? We know that the species spreads easily in the states where it is common. Cultivating it in Georgia gardens will very likely lead to its spread outside of gardens and into the wider landscape. Will it spread only to human-disturbed areas? Or, as a disturbance follower, will it invade and come to dominate native plant communities that are dependent on natural disturbances, such as river scour communities and fire-maintained woodlands and prairies? Could Common Milkweed actually outcompete the native milkweeds listed above? There are both anecdotal (Mace, pers. comm. 2025) and scientific reports (Lewis et al. 2021) that Common Milkweed can hybridize with other milkweeds known to be native in Georgia. Is it possible that Common Milkweed could genetically swamp our natives?

A final consideration is a larger question and one worth thinking deeply about: is there value in preserving this one small piece, truly native milkweeds, of Georgia's botanical heritage? As Aldo Leopold put it, isn't keeping "every cog and wheel…the first precaution of intelligent tinkering"? Or, is the protection and preservation of historical plant ranges important or even feasible in light of the drastic changes that may occur due to climate change?

We don't know the answers to these questions and, even if research were initiated today, we probably wouldn't know the answers soon enough to affect the status of Monarchs.

Our Conclusion

After considering all these questions and the lack of good data to provide answers to many of them, we conclude that the risks of growing Common Milkweed in Georgia's native gardens, its potential invasiveness and the potential

to hybridize with known natives, coupled with the paucity of long-term historical data and the increased availability in native nurseries of other milkweed species, argue for excluding this species from our gardens for now. ❀

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