



Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program

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Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

Whorled Milkweed *Asclepias verticillata* L.

State Status: **Threatened**

Federal Status: **None**

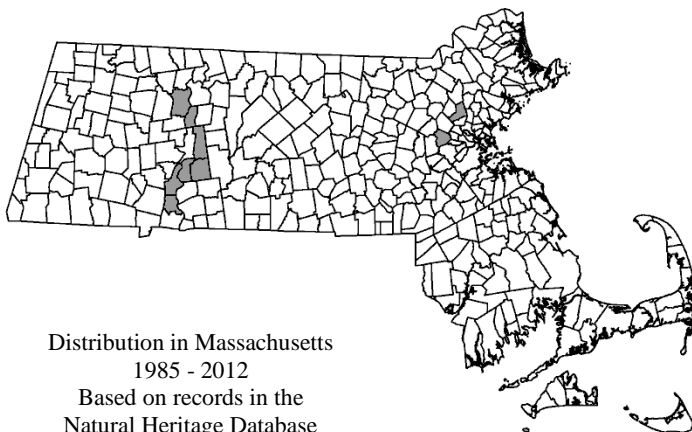
DESCRIPTION: Whorled Milkweed is an herbaceous perennial in the Dogbane family (Apocynaceae) found on dry, open or lightly-shaded rock outcrops, balds, and slopes. Its upright stems are 2 to 5 dm tall (~ 8–20 in.) and unbranched to the flower clusters. It has narrow linear leaves that are 2 to 5 cm long and curled under (revolute) along the edges. Leaves are mostly in whorls of three to six along the stem, and the attractive white or greenish flowers are borne in rounded umbels.

AIDS TO IDENTIFICATION: Whorled Milkweed is identified by:

- Whorls of three to six narrow linear leaves
- White or greenish flowers with “hood and horn” structures characteristic of milkweeds
- Slender, upright pods



Whorled Milkweed has narrow linear leaves in whorls of three to six, and white or greenish flowers in umbels. Photo by Bruce Sorrie.



Distribution in Massachusetts
1985 - 2012
Based on records in the
Natural Heritage Database

SIMILAR SPECIES: Whorled Milkweed is the only milkweed with numerous narrow leaves in whorls of three to six, with leaves rolled under along the edges. Four-leaved Milkweed (*Asclepias quadrifolia*) has lance-ovate leaves in whorls of three to four, and white to pale pink flowers.

A Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the Massachusetts State Wildlife Action Plan

Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

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Please allow the Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program to continue to conserve the biodiversity of Massachusetts with a contribution for ‘endangered wildlife conservation’ on your state income tax form, as these donations comprise a significant portion of our operating budget.

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POPULATION STATUS IN

MASSACHUSETTS: Whorled Milkweed is listed under the Massachusetts Endangered Species Act as Threatened. All listed species are protected from killing, collecting, possessing, or sale, and from activities that would destroy habitat and thus directly or indirectly cause mortality or disrupt critical behaviors. Whorled Milkweed is currently known from Franklin, Hampden, Hampshire, and Middlesex Counties, and was documented historically from Barnstable, Bristol, Dukes, Norfolk, Plymouth, and Suffolk Counties.

RANGE: Whorled Milkweed is found in North America from Massachusetts and New York west to the Great Plains states and adjacent Canada, and south to the Gulf Coast. It is imperiled or critically imperiled in several states or provinces.

HABITAT: In Massachusetts, Whorled Milkweed is found on dry balds, rock outcrops, ridgetops, rocky glades, and cliffs, with full or filtered sun. The tree canopy is open, and may include Red Oak (*Quercus rubra*), Shagbark Hickory (*Carya ovata*), Pignut Hickory (*Carya glabra*), Eastern Red Cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*), and White Ash (*Fraxinus americana*). Associated species include Scrub Oak (*Quercus ilicifolia*), Pasture Rose (*Rosa caroliniana*), Divaricate Sunflower (*Helianthus divaricatus*), Little Bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), Ebony Spleenwort (*Asplenium platyneuron*), and others.

THREATS AND MANAGEMENT

RECOMMENDATIONS: Some sites that support Whorled Milkweed are near popular trails; where foot, mountain bike, or ATV traffic threaten populations, trails may need to be re-routed. Caution is needed when conducting trail maintenance to avoid damage to populations. Whorled Milkweed thrives in open sun; increased shade associated with forest succession may threaten populations. Deer browse, especially of flowers or fruit pods, may also reduce recruitment of new plants. Invasive species present near some populations may require control efforts. All active management of rare plant populations (including invasive species removal) is subject to review under the Massachusetts Endangered Species Act, and should be planned in close consultation with the Massachusetts Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program

Flowering in Massachusetts

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec

REFERENCES:

Gleason, H. A., and A. Cronquist. 1991. *Manual of Vascular Plants of Northeastern United States and Adjacent Canada*, 2nd edition. The New York Botanical Garden, Bronx, NY.

NatureServe. 2009. NatureServe Explorer: An online encyclopedia of life [web application]. Version 7.1. NatureServe, Arlington, Virginia. Available <http://www.natureserve.org/explorer>.

Rhoads, A. F., and T. A. Block. 2000. *The Plants of Pennsylvania: An Illustrated Manual*. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, PA.

Updated 2019

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