



Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program

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MASSCHUSETTS WATCH LIST PLANTS

Butterfly-weed

Asclepias tuberosa

State Status: Delisted

Federal Status: None

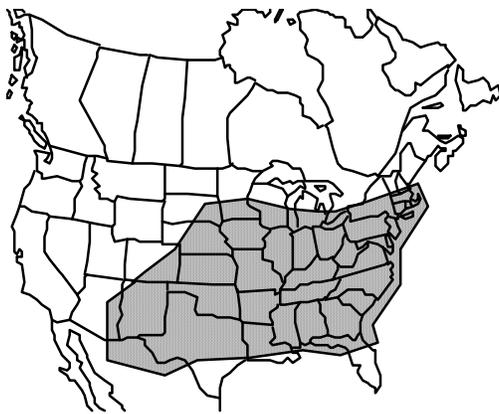
Description: Butterfly-weed is a tall--3-7 dm (about 1 to 2 1/3 ft.)--pubescent (hairy), perennial in the Milkweed family (Asclepiadaceae). It has large, linear-to-oblong, alternate leaves. Unlike most milkweeds, it does not have milky juice. Butterfly-weed has bright orange flowers arranged in terminal umbels. In August, these flowers are conspicuous in the plant's grassland habitats. This species is most often found in small, localized populations.

Similar Species: Butterfly-weed is very distinct when flowering; however, in spring and fall it can be distinguished from other milkweeds because it is pubescent and largely alternate-leaved. In a vegetative state, it is somewhat reminiscent of members of the Borage family.

Range: The documented range of butterfly-weed extends from southern New Hampshire south to Florida and west to Minnesota, South Dakota, Arizona and Mexico.



Butterfly-weed (also called Orange Milkweed) with pollinator. Photo: Jennifer Garrett, NHESP



Documented Range of
Butterfly-weed

Habitat: In Massachusetts, Butterfly-weed is found in open, dry sandy areas (including sandplains, clearings and old fields), often in association with Little Bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), Pennsylvania Sedge (*Carex pensylvanica*), Poverty Grass (*Danthonia spicata*), Stiff Aster (*Ionactis linariifolius*), Yellow Wild Indigo (*Baptisia tinctoria*), Goat's Rue (*Tephrosia virginiana*), and Lowbush Blueberry (*Vaccinium angustifolium*).

Population Status: Butterfly-weed is NHESP's Plant Watch List in Massachusetts. (Watch List species are conferred no special protection under state or federal law; however, they are believed to be uncommon in the state, and the Natural Heritage Program is interested

in receiving information about any populations). Most sites are in the southeastern section of the state, with scattered sites located to the northeast and into the Connecticut River valley. Butterfly-weed's numbers and range within the state are reduced from early in the 20th century; many old stations for this species no longer exist. Causes of this decline include habitat destruction, succession to woody plants (caused by fire suppression and a lack of grazing), and transplanting and collecting by wild flower enthusiasts. In recent times, habitat destruction has been the most critical of threats to this species.



Butterfly-weed and commonly associated species in a sandplain grassland habitat. Photo: Patricia Swain, NHESP.

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