

# Asclepias tuberosa (Butterfly weed)

Botanical Bytes  
By Gregory Bruner

Foliage Height: 12"-24"

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Flower Height: 12"-24"

Foliage Color: Green

Flower Color: Orange

USDA Hardiness: 3-9

Moisture: Dry - Average

Light: Sun - Part Sun



*Asclepias tuberosa* is a hard-working beauty, native to 75% of the United States. Its blazing orange awesomeness spreads gardening cheer far and wide. Cold hardiness is not an issue because it happily grows in northern Minnesota and southern Maine. Heat and humidity are no problem in southern Florida, and dry heat in Arizona does not slow it down either.

Butterfly weed, Orange milkweed, Pleurisy root, and Chigger flower are a few of the common names I have encountered during my travels. Botanists often have method to their madness when naming plants. *Asclepias* is an excellent example. *Asclepias* was derived from Asklepios, who was the Greek god of medicine. *Tuberosa* is descriptive of its massive fleshy root system.

The value of this plant to Native American Indians was huge. Butterfly weed was used by at least eight tribes for a wide variety of needs. Infusions and poultices were applied for various ailments and injuries, young leaves and tender seedpods were prepared as part of a meal, and old stems were harvested for their fibers that were made into rope or rough cloth. Few plants were as versatile as this orange beauty.

Gardeners treasure this wonderful plant for its combination of toughness and beauty. The home garden generally has an appropriate spot for this one. The more sun the better; it can handle it all day long and love it. Soils should be well drained with average to dry moisture levels. The taproot of Butterfly weed allows it to withstand very dry conditions but also makes it almost impossible to transplant once mature. Make sure to plant it in the right spot the first time; moving it is not an option later.

This plant has orange flower power and is tough as nails. What else could we want as gardeners? Let's not forget the butterflies. *Asclepias* species are the only food source for the larvae of Monarch butterflies, which makes *Asclepias* very important. The glycoside that is produced in *Asclepias* plants makes the taste of the larvae very unappealing to predators, which helps the caterpillars to survive.

The main issue this botanical wonder may have in the garden is related to water and sun. Once established, little or no water is necessary. Beds with sprinklers are a poor choice. Choose the hottest, driest place in the garden with well-drained soil and it will thrive for years.

*Asclepias* is an incredible addition to a sunny butterfly garden. Seldom do we come across a plant that is a showstopper with flower color; has a rich, long historical background; and is so important for butterflies. Butterfly weed is definitely a winner for the butterflies in the garden as well as the gardener in search of cool plant facts.