Working with Milkweed

Please note to be always very careful when working with milkweeds of any kind and always wear gloves. The milky latex sap can cause permanent eye damage and skin rashes. There are over 160 different types of Milkweed in the US and most are not toxic. The roots contain the lowest amount of toxins with the highest levels being in stems and leaves.

- Species with whorled, narrow leaves are typically more toxic than species with broad leaves.
- Asclepias labriformis is said to be the most toxic
- Common milkweed, A. syriaca is only slightly toxic to humans.

The reason milkweed latex is so harmful to your eyes is that the cardenolides in the latex can cause a temporary dysfunction of cornea referred to as Corneal oedema. This is actually a swelling of the cornea caused as the endothelial cells responsible for pumping fluid out of the cornea stops functioning. With A. curassavica the effects can last from 24 to 48 hours whereas problems associated inflammation due to contact with A. fruticosa could go on for days even with treatment.

Even very young seedlings can cause adverse skin reactions with many people. So it is very important they we remind anyone working with milkweed to be very vigilant, wear gloves and use the utmost care. Even very young seedlings can have enough resinoids stored to cause an inflammation of the skin known as atopic dermatitis. Acute atopic dermatitis can produce weeping, oozing areas of very itchy skin. If it does cause an irritation completely wash the area and use a hydrocortisone ointment to reduce redness and itching.

Monarch preferred milkweeds for egg laying;

1. Asclepias curassavica (Non-indigenous Tropical Milkweed)
2. Asclepias incarnata
3. Asclepias sullivantii
4. Asclepias syriaca
5. Asclepias speciosa
6. Asclepias exaltata
7. Asclepias hirtella
8. Asclepias tuberosa
9. Asclepias verticillata

The new villain on the block seems to be Asclepias curassavica ‘Tropical Milkweed’. Planting Tropical Milkweed it in your area will not stop the monarchs from migrating! It is only hardy up to zone 8B and will die off by the end of summer with the first frost if you have any that has not been eaten by then. Not only is A. curassavica their first choice for egg laying it also has a medicinal effect on monarchs infected with protozoa and infected females will seek it out to both lay their eggs and self medicate.