

Common Name: PURPLE MILKWEED

Scientific Name: *Asclepias purpurascens* Linnaeus

Other Commonly Used Names: none

Previously Used Scientific Names: *Vincetoxicum purpurascens* C. Morris & Decaisne

Family: Asclepiadaceae (milkweed) or Apocynaceae (dogbane)

Rarity Ranks: G5?/S1

State Legal Status: Rare

Federal Legal Status: none

Federal Wetland Status: FACU

Description: Perennial **herb** with hairy stems 1½ - 3¼ feet (50 - 100 cm) tall. **Leaves** 4 - 6¾ inches long and 2 - 3½ inches wide (10 - 16 cm long, 5 - 9 cm wide), opposite; oval to lance-shaped with a pointed tip; upper leaf surface dark green, mostly hairless, with a red midvein and a conspicuous pattern of pale veins; lower leaf surface pale green and hairy; **leaf stalk** about ¼ - 1 inch (0.5 - 2.5 cm) long. **Flower clusters** at the top of the stem. **Flowers** about ¼ - ⅜ inch (7 - 10 mm) long, rose-purple, with 5 down-curved petals, 5 erect hoods, and 5 sharply pointed horns that are shorter than the hoods and curve sharply inward over the greenish-white column. **Fruit** an erect, downy pod 4 - 6 inches (10 - 16 cm) long; fruits are rarely produced. Leaves and stem exude **milky latex/sap** when cut.

Similar Species: Butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*) has alternate leaves and orange flowers and it lacks milky sap. Swamp milkweed (*A. incarnata*) is a wetland plant with long, narrow leaves and small, dark pink flowers with horns that are longer than the hoods.

Related Rare Species: Barrens milkweed (*Asclepias hirtella*, Special Concern) occurs in prairies and limestone glades in northwest Georgia; it has narrow leaves and greenish-white flowers with purple lobes.

Habitat: Prairies, glades, and sunny openings in flatwoods over calcium-rich soils in the Coosa River valley.

Life History: Purple milkweed, like other milkweeds, is probably self-incompatible and relies entirely on insects to effect cross-pollination. The flowers are rich in nectar that attracts numerous insects, including butterflies, bumble bees, true bugs, and flies. Small, widely separated populations, such as Georgia's, are vulnerable to low rates of successful cross-pollination and fruit production. Purple milkweed does not reproduce vegetatively. Seeds bear a tuft of hairs which aid in wind dispersal. As with other milkweeds, purple milkweed produces a milky latex which is high in compounds that are toxic to insects, especially cardiac glycosides. Deer are not discouraged by these compounds and have been known to eat plants to the ground.

Survey Recommendations: Surveys are best conducted during flowering (late May–June) and fruiting (July–August).

Range: Georgia, north to Maine and Ontario, west to South Dakota and Texas. It is rare throughout most of the eastern United States.

Threats: Conversion of habitat to pine plantations and developments. Overbrowsing by deer.

Georgia Conservation Status: About 6 populations are known, with a total of 60 plants, on Berry College land.

Conservation and Management Recommendations: Protect Coosa Valley prairies and flatwoods from clearing, logging, and development. Allow prescribed fire in Coosa Valley prairies to burn into edges of woodlands to create sunny, open patches.

Selected References:

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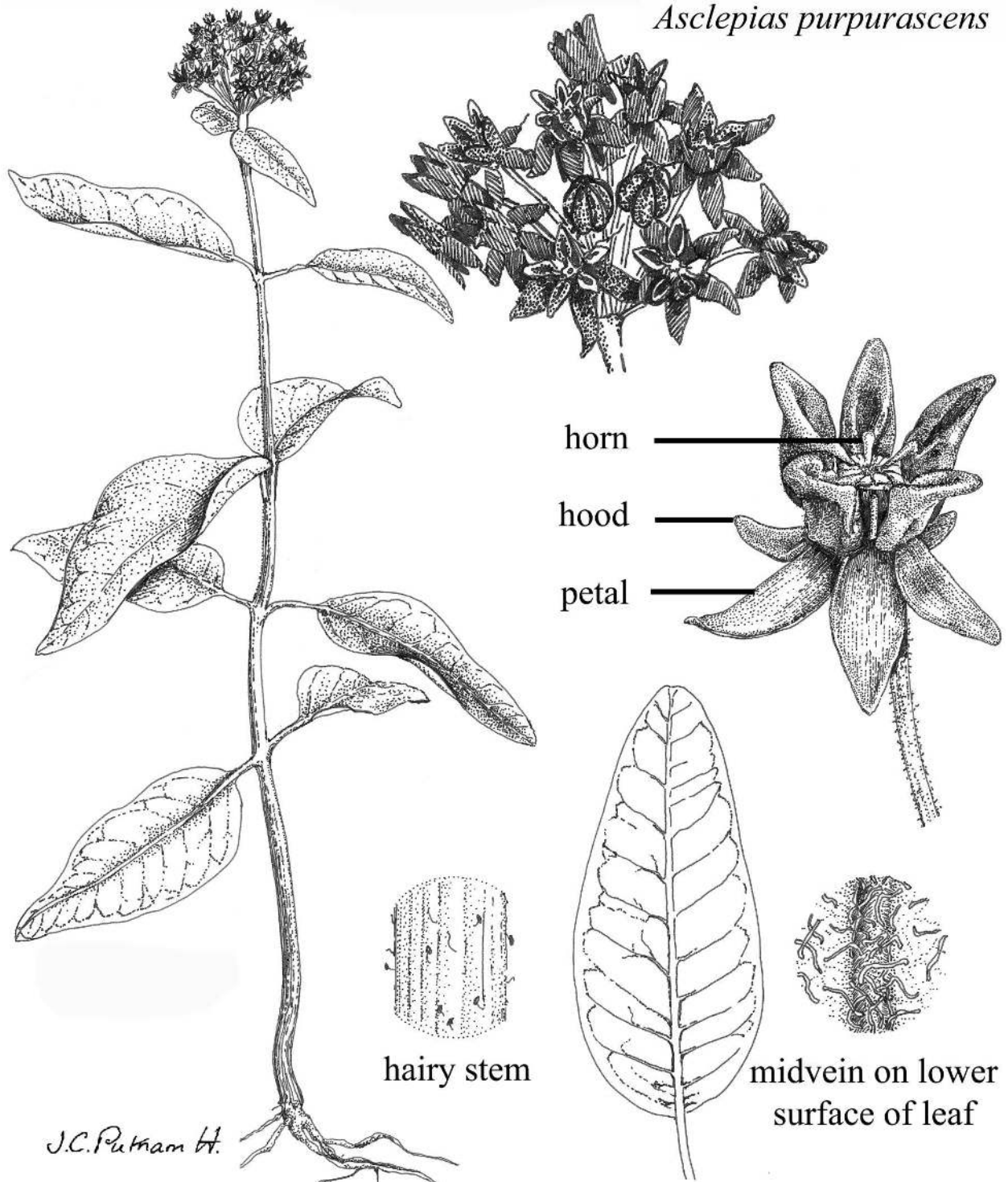
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Date Compiled or Updated:

L. Chafin, Oct. 2007: original account

K. Owers, Jan. 2010: updated status and ranks, added pictures

PURPLE MILKWEED
Asclepias purpurascens





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Inflorescence



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Inflorescence