

Asclepias tuberosa Butterfly Weed, Indian Paintbrush¹

Edward F. Gilman, Ryan W. Klein, and Gail Hansen²

Introduction

Butterfly weed is a member of the milkweed family. The plants grow to two feet tall and flower from July to September. The flower colors are orange, red, and yellow. The plant will not flower freely until well-established. The best sites have exposure to sun or partial shade and almost any soil. The plant tolerates dry soil but not heavy soil. Butterfly weed is slow to start growth in the spring. Mark its location to prevent damage to easily injured dormant crowns. A taproot makes transplanting difficult. Once established do not disturb butterfly weed unnecessarily.



Figure 1. Full form—*Asclepias tuberosa*: butterfly weed, Indian paintbrush.

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Figure 2. Flower—*Asclepias tuberosa*: butterfly weed, Indian paintbrush.

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General Information

Scientific name: *Asclepias tuberosa*

Pronunciation: as-KLEE-pee-us too-bur-O-suh

Common name(s): butterfly weed, Indian paintbrush, butterfly milkweed

Family: *Apocynaceae*

Plant type: herbaceous; annual

USDA hardiness zones: 8 through 10 (Figure 3)

Planting months for zone 7: June; July

Planting months for zone 8: May; June; July; August

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2. Edward F. Gilman, professor, Environmental Horticulture Department; Ryan W. Klein, graduate assistant, Environmental Horticulture Department; and Gail Hansen, associate professor, Environmental Horticulture Department; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

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Planting months for zone 9: March; April; May; June; July; August; September

Planting months for zone 10 and 11: February; March; April; May; June; July; August; September; October; November; December

Origin: native to Florida

Invasive potential: may self-seed each year

Uses: naturalizing; cut flowers; attracts butterflies; mass planting; attracts hummingbirds

Availability: somewhat available, may have to go out of the region to find the plant



Figure 3. Shaded area represents potential planting range.

Description

Height: 2 to 3 feet

Spread: 2 to 3 feet

Plant habit: round; upright

Plant density: moderate

Growth rate: fast

Texture: medium

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate

Leaf type: simple

Leaf margin: entire

Leaf shape: oblong

Leaf venation: parallel

Leaf type and persistence: deciduous

Leaf blade length: 4 to 8 inches

Leaf color: green

Fall color: not applicable

Fall characteristic: not applicable

Flower

Flower color: red; yellow

Flower characteristic: summer-flowering; spring-flowering

Fruit

Fruit shape: unknown

Fruit length: unknown

Fruit cover: unknown

Fruit color: unknown

Fruit characteristic: inconspicuous and not showy

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: not applicable

Current year stem/twig color: green

Current year stem/twig thickness: thick

Culture

Light requirement: plant grows in full sun

Soil tolerances: acidic; sand; loam; clay

Drought tolerance: moderate

Soil salt tolerance: poor

Plant spacing: 18 to 24 inches

Other

Roots: not applicable

Winter interest: no special winter interest

Outstanding plant: plant has outstanding ornamental features and could be planted more

Pest resistance: very sensitive to one or more pests or diseases which can affect plant health or aesthetics

Use and Management

As the name implies, this is one of many small plants that attract butterflies to the landscape. One to several plants is usually all that is needed to draw butterflies to the garden. There are reports that *Asclepias* has a tendency to escape cultivation and may seed into the landscape. They grow naturally in dry, sandy soil along roadsides from New England to Colorado, Texas and into Florida.

Raw roots have been eaten to treat bronchial ailments. Roots have also been taken internally for intestinal gas, hemorrhaging and other ailments.

Propagation is by seed or division in the spring. The seed germinates in 3 to 4 weeks at 70°F to 75°F. Plants may be planted in a cold frame in spring or fall. Fresh seed may need chilling.

Design Considerations

The thin stems and widely spaced leaves of the butterfly weed (Indian paintbrush) give a slightly weedy appearance (hence the name) so most gardeners mix them with shorter

plants where the bright red, orange, and yellow flowers can be easily seen above the ground cover. The leaves can be stripped by caterpillars and the plant often looks stick-like at certain times of the year so using ground cover also helps hide the bare stems until they can be cut back. Pair with plants with large foliage and mounding or loose spreading forms to help the butterfly weed poke through the plants. White or purple flowers are complementary colors to yellow and red, which will contrast nicely.

Pest and Diseases

Aphids may infest butterfly weed.

Leaf spot diseases are seen but not serious.

Rusts cause the formation of reddish-colored spots.

Cucumber mosaic virus causes leaf mottling, but no chemical control is available.