



# RARE PLANTS OF NEW HAMPSHIRE

## Blunt-leaved Milkweed

*Asclepias amplexicaulis* J. E. Smith     **Synonyms:** clasping milkweed

**Dogbane family (Apocynaceae, formerly of Asclepiadaceae)**

### What Does It Look Like?

A perennial herb with milky sap. The hairless stem has a whitish, waxy, surface and reaches 0.3-1.0 m (about 1-3 ft.) in height.

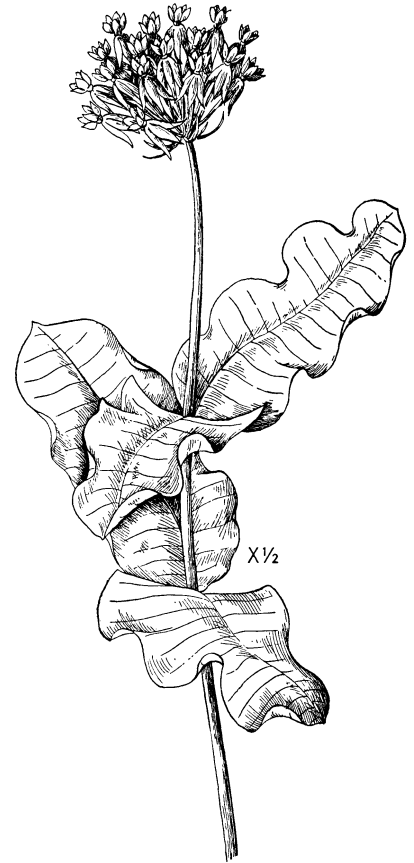
**Leaves:** The stalkless oval or broadly oblong leaves are typically blunt at both ends, have wavy margins, bear a tiny sharp tip at the summit, are located opposite each other, and clasp the stem.

**Flowers:** The single cluster or umbel of small flowers is found at the top of the stem (rarely, two umbels occur). The flowers are 5-parted and characteristic of the milkweeds in that each flower has five hooded bodies, each bearing an incurved *horn*. Collectively these unusual flower parts form the shape of a crown above the five reflexed petals. In blunt-leaved milkweed the hoods are pink and the petals are greenish-purple. Flowering is in June and July.

**Fruit:** The usually smooth pods are 10-13 cm (about 4-5 in.) long, swollen in the middle with long ends, on short, contorted stalks. The seeds have long silky hairs that help them disperse in the wind.

**Key features:** The stalkless leaves that clasp the stem are distinctive among milkweeds.

**Similar species:** Common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*), often found growing alongside blunt-leaved milkweed, has stalked leaves that do not clasp the stem and has fruit pods with a bumpy surface and hairy stems. Purple milkweed (*A. purpurascens*), only historically known from New Hampshire, was once found in similar habitat. It has stalked leaves that do not clasp the stem, purplish-red flowers and downy pods.



### Where Is It Found?

Blunt-leaved milkweed is found in dry, sandy soil. Populations in New Hampshire may occur in pitch pine/scrub oak barrens, on sandy river bluffs, or along roadsides and utility lines in association with these habitats. The largest population known in New Hampshire is found on a lake beach strand in association with pitch pine habitat.

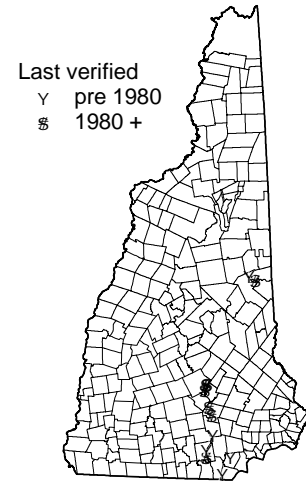
All sites where this species grows tend to be early- to mid-successional habitats historically opened by periodic fires. Populations found along utility lines and roadsides have likely been maintained by removal of encroaching woody vegetation. However, most of these populations are quite small. Several other rare plant species are found in association with blunt-leaved milkweed and its habitat. These include northern blazing star (*Liatriis borealis*), wild lupine (*Lupinus perennis*), hairy hudsonia (*Hudsonia tomentosa*), golden-heather (*Hudsonia ericoides*), and fine grass-leaved goldenrod (*Euthamia tenuifolia*).



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**Conservation status:** Blunt-leaved milkweed is threatened in New Hampshire. Of 12 known locations, seven have been verified since 1980. Most populations are very small, ranging from a single plant to 16 plants. One population once had about 100 plants, but it has not been verified since 1988.

**Range:** New Hampshire to southeast Minnesota, south to Florida, Nebraska and Texas.



## Why Is It Rare?

While the suitable early- to mid-successional sandy habitat required by blunt-leaved milkweed is not very common in New Hampshire, this does not fully explain why this species is so rare. It is at the northern end of its range, but further reasons for its rarity are not well understood. Lack of adequate seed-set may be one possibility. Fruit is not frequently found, possibly due to inadequate pollination or loss of flowers to herbivores.

## Conservation Considerations:

The primary threats to this species include habitat conversion to development and shading out by woody species. Mowing at the wrong time of year (before it sets seed later in the summer) or herbicide spraying may threaten populations growing along utility lines or roadsides. Invasive non-native species may also be a threat. Glossy buckthorn (*Rhamnus frangula*) is known to be invading the habitat supporting at least one population.

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The information in this fact sheet is current as of December 2002. It is based on a database maintained by the NH Natural Heritage Program, a bureau in the Division of Forests & Lands in the Department of Resources and Economic Development. NH Natural Heritage is a member of NatureServe, which represents an international network of Heritage programs. Illustration by Anne Rogelberg. Reprinted with permission from The New York Botanical Garden Press. Originally published in H. A. Gleason, The New Britton and Brown Illustrated Flora of the Northeastern United States and Adjacent Canada, Vol. III, p. 76, copyright 1952, The New York Botanical Garden.

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