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One Garden 'Weed' We Need

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Asclepias tuberosa

One Garden 'Weed' We Need

by Susan Tito

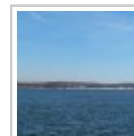
It was Shakespeare's Juliet who famously uttered "what's in a name?"

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— and so it goes for *Asclepias tuberosa* — perhaps one of the most overlooked and underused perennials native to our region.

Butterfly weed (which also is known as milkweed and pleurisy root) may never go down in the annals of plants with catchy names, but no one can dispute this perennial's performance as a powerhouse in the summer garden.

Despite its lackluster name, butterfly weed is about to get a lot more popular. Never heard of it? You will soon. The Perennial Plant Association named it the 2017 Perennial Plant of the Year™ — a designation that is a big deal in the world of horticulture. That means more local nurseries, big box stores and mail order companies will start carrying and promoting this useful plant.

To become a Perennial Plant of the Year, a species must possess attributes such as adaptability to a range of climatic zones and good resistance to insects, disease and deer.

Butterfly weed has all those wonderful traits — and then some. One of its best qualities is that it is a magnet for pollinators — birds, bees and especially butterflies (hence the name butterfly weed). In fact, its flat-topped clustered orange blooms attract many nectar-seeking species, but it is its leaves that are most valuable, as they are the only food source for monarch butterfly caterpillars.

The role pollinators play in the garden cannot be overstated: As these creatures flit about, they transfer pollen, which is critical to plant reproduction. When you consider that many of our food crops require pollination to generate seeds, it's easy to understand why it's essential to maintain healthy populations of beneficial insects and birds.


By planting butterfly weed, you're making a bold commitment to preserving the environment. But there is another reason to brighten your yard with this native — it's undisputedly lovely.

With its long bloom time (June through August), butterfly weed is a standout in the landscape and can be used in many ways. Consider creating a meadow or butterfly garden. Better yet, plant it in drifts for real impact.

That's how Steven Still, executive director of the Perennial Plant

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Association, remembers seeing the plant grow and loving the way it looked. His familiarity with it pre-dates the Perennial Plant of the Year distinction.

Mr. Still said that butterfly weed has been a personal favorite for a long time. He described being awed by orange “dotting the prairie” and marveling at how well the plant grew on the infertile banks along the Kansas highway.

The ability to grow in lean soil may be one of butterfly weed’s best assets. Think of this plant as the grateful houseguest who doesn’t want to inconvenience her host, so she insists that dinner be served on paper plates. But just because butterfly weed can tolerate less than optimal conditions (it’s been known to grow in Long Island sand dunes), that doesn’t mean it doesn’t deserve better treatment.

Plant in a medium that’s average in composition and water it well until established. Give this beauty what it needs — a site with full sun and average well-drained soil — and you’ll be rewarded with a robust showing of 2-foot-tall plants.

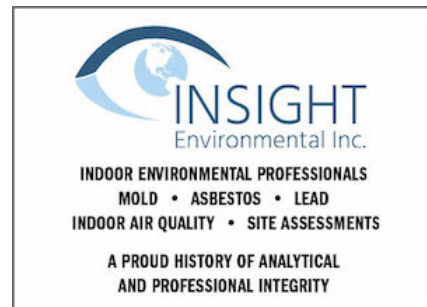
In horticulture, the sleep-creep-leap rule applies. Butterfly weed may show modest growth its first year (sleep), increase in size and bloom (leap) the next year and by year 3 bloom its little orange head off!

After the flowers fade, the show isn’t over. Butterfly weed will produce seed pods. Resist the urge to remove them, as the dried pods add ornamental interest to the garden and are excellent and inexpensive way to increase the number of plants you have in your landscape.

Not crazy about orange? Use butterfly weed sparingly in a formal or structured garden setting as a foil to another color. It will nicely set off cooler blues and blue-greens. Or choose a mixed variety like ‘Gay Butterflies,’ which features red, orange and yellow blooms on the same plant, or one that isn’t orange like ‘Hello Yellow.’

When you consider this plant’s beauty and usefulness in the garden, you will realize that this is one “weed” you’ll want to keep around for a long time.

Susan Tito is a freelance writer and proprietor of Summerland Garden Design and Consulting. She earned a certificate in ornamental garden design from the New York Botanical Garden and is a member of the



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