COMMON MILKWEED and SHOWY MILKWEED

(*Asclepias syriaca* L. and *Asclepias speciosa* Torr.)

Common milkweed

Common milkweed flower

Monarch butterfly larvae

Showy milkweed flower

COMMON MILKWEED and SHOWY MILKWEED

State Noxious Weeds List: **No.**

Common and showy milkweed are native to North America. Both species are robust, fleshy perennial plants that flourish in orchards, waste places and along roadsides. Milkweed has been used for medicinal, industrial, decorative and even for food purposes, despite having some degree of toxicity. Milkweed is best known as a primary food source for the monarch butterfly.

Identification and growth form:

As the common name implies, both species contain a thick, white, milky latex throughout the plant. Flowers are arranged in clusters at the top of the plant and are pink to white. Common milkweed flowers are held in tighter clusters and are more pink than white compared with showy milkweed. Showy milkweed flowers also have long lobes that stand upright, which are not found on common milkweed. Both species grow 2 to 4 feet tall and have large opposite leaves 3 to 5 inches wide and 6 to 10 inches long, which are covered with fine pubescence. These perennial plants have shallow fibrous roots. Milkweed grows over a wide range of soil moisture conditions, but can become dense under medium or high moisture levels.

Seed pods are 3 to 5 inches long and contain dozens of flat, reddish-brown seeds with tufts of hairs that allow the seed to travel long distances in the wind. An established market exists for milkweed seed floss as a nonallergenic fill to replace imported duck and goose down in comforters and for seed sales in prairie restorations and butterfly gardens. Most commercial milkweed supplies still are collected from the wild.

Why is this plant a concern?

Common milkweed can be aggressive in cropland areas given the right conditions. Reasons for the increase in milkweed densities in cropland include spread by the extensive root system, farmers using less tillage, several years of high rainfall and tolerance to most commonly used herbicides. Given the opportunity to spread and become established, common milkweed is extremely difficult to control.

How do I control these plants?

Since milkweed plants are native and a major food source for the monarch and other butterfly species, control is discouraged. However, if the plant becomes established in cropland, crop yield loss may occur and control would be warranted.

Chemical. Tordon (picloram) plus 2,4-D at high rates will reduce milkweed density but cannot be used in cropland. Glyphosate will suppress milkweed temporarily in cropland while Express (tribenuron) can be applied with 2,4-D plus dicamba for spot treatment.

Cultural. Cultivation will reduce milkweed species in cropland but care must be taken not to spread the roots to noninfested areas.

Biological. Monarch butterfly larvae feed heavily on milkweed and often remove a majority of the leaves on a plant.