



Harvesting Milkweed Seeds

Despite the fact that almost all native milkweeds of Oklahoma are considered perennial plants, for unknown reasons, swamp milkweed acts like an annual. And, while most milkweeds tolerate drought conditions in the field, swamp milkweed either needs irrigation in the landscape or to be planted in a moist site. So, acting as perennials, most milkweeds will re-emerge each year from their original root system. But, because our Tulsa area winter temperatures can freeze and kill most of the dropped seedlings, seeds will generally have to be collected and harvested in order to grow new/additional plants.

To support the Monarchs next summer, you can easily collect seedlings from your current plants (or from neighbors!).

Collect seeds when pods are ripe and split open upon touch. The seeds should be brown. Do NOT collect pods in which the seeds are white, cream colored or pale.

Do not collect open pods with numerous milkweed bugs on the seeds or pods.

Be sure to obtain permission before collecting on private property or federal, state or county properties.

Milkweed bugs use their beak or rostrum to pierce and feed on milkweed seeds rendering them unviable. The damage is often difficult to see.



After you have made your collection, spread out the pods and check one more time for bugs that may have escaped your eye.

Once pods have been allowed to dry, the seeds can be separated by holding one end and stripping the seeds away from the floss with your fingers. The floss is the white fluff that can easily float off in the wind.

Another way to separate the mature seeds from the floss is to place the seeds in a paper bag with a coin. Cut a hole in the bottom of the bag so the seeds fall out after a good shaking.

Gardeners should store seeds in a paper envelope located in a cool and dry place and labeled with species, date and location.

Milkweed seeds need to be stratified (that is, the seed coat needs to be chilled to germinate). This stratification can be accomplished by placing seeds in a moist paper towel in the refrigerator for about four to six weeks. Start seed stratification in early March so they will be ready to plant mid-April in Tulsa.

PRECAUTION

Milkweed sap is toxic and can irritate your skin and damage your eyes. The initial irritation in the eyes is a bit painful followed by a cloudiness of the cornea which can take a week to clear up.

Wear gloves while collecting milkweed pods and avoid contacting your face or any region near the eyes with the gloves. Wash your hands carefully after handling milkweed pods. If milkweed sap gets into your eyes, seek medical attention immediately.

For additional information see MonarchWatch.org or [The Kerr Center Guide to Native Milkweeds of Oklahoma](#).