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Name That Plant!

I am a shrub to small tree. I am a bit unconventional, as I bloom in late fall to early winter. When my seeds are mature, I can hurl them long distances, allegedly up to 30 feet! Extracts from my twigs have for centuries, starting with the Native Americans, been used for medicinal and other uses. Folks even use my larger twigs to locate water or even precious metals. I have been very helpful to you humans, so I can't figure out why you gave me that bad name.



The answer is embedded in the text somewhere in this newsletter. Photo by Bill Stringer.

The Milkweeds of South Carolina

Bill Stringer

Milkweeds are common occupants of our roadsides, forest edges and wetlands, but a cursory examination of this genus reveals a far more intriguing story than we might guess. The milkweeds have had a close, long-term co-evolutionary relationship with a set of foraging insect species. The milky sap for which they are named is far more than just an innocuous liquid component of the tissues. The milkweeds are all members of the genus *Asclepias*, which contains about 90 species (including sub-species) in North America. The genus name *Asclepias*, applied by Carl Linnaeus, is derived from Asclepius, the ancient Greek god of healing and medicine. The famous serpent-and-staff symbol of the medical profession is known as the Rod of Asclepius, apparently from the tradition that he allowed snakes to run free in his medical facilities. Go figure! Interestingly, milkweeds have toxic properties as well as alleged healing properties. Some milkweeds have historically been used for medicinal and food purposes.

(See **Milkweeds**, page 4)

There are 20 *Asclepias* species (including 2 sub-species of *A. tuberosa*) found in South Carolina. They are found in a wide variety of habitats from dry sandy sites to marshy sites, and sunny open to forested sites. They range in appearance from drab to very showy. Ecologically, they have co-evolved into some



Figure 1. Typical milkweed milky sap or latex. Photo courtesy of Dan Culbert. okeechobee.ifas.ufl.edu

interesting relationships with insects and other animals. One of the most interesting aspects of milkweeds is their unique flower structure and mechanism of pollination, which can pose significant risk of injury for the pollinator insects. We will examine some of these issues and then examine the characteristics of the 20 milkweed species found in South Carolina.