



# Cultivation Notes

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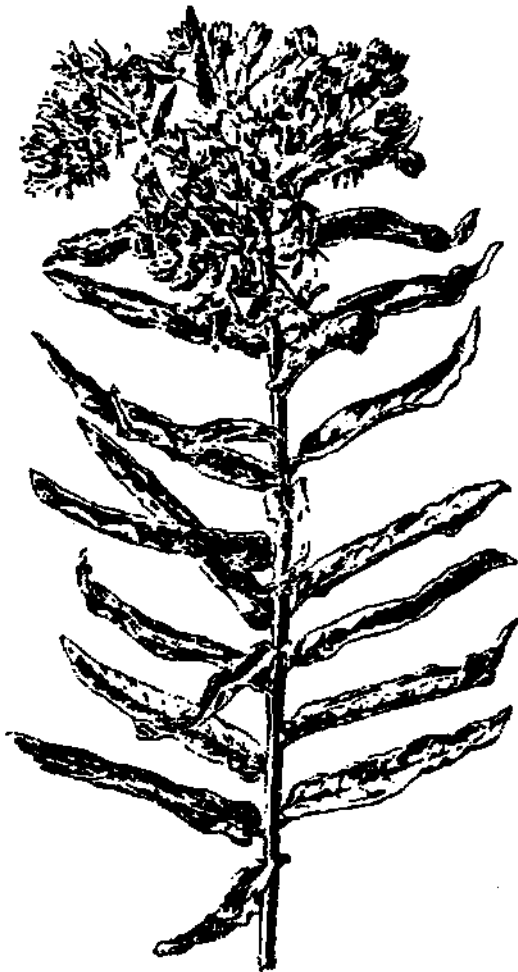
This paper on the cultivation of *Asclepias tuberosa* is the first in a series of cultivation notes on Rhode Island's native plants. We hope to present a new species in each RIWPS *Newsletter*, and will print them on separate sheets so they can be filed for future reference. The cultivation notes are a combination of personal experience and published information. We have found that "authorities" on wild plant gardening often contradict one another, and do not always conform with our own experiences; by combining both we hope to hit on what may work best here in Rhode Island. We welcome any member's direct experience with this, and other plants, so that we can all learn from each other.

## BUTTERFLY WEED (PLEURISY ROOT)

*Asclepias tuberosa* L.

A Rhode Island Native Plant

Family ASCLEPIADACEAE



Each July as we drove long Route 4 near Allenton, Rhode Island, I would look for a stand of Butterfly Weed growing near a grassy bank on the roadside. This stand disappeared some years ago, but Butterfly Weed can still be found growing wild in old pastures and even along Interstate 95, although the *Garden in the Woods' Cultivation Guide* of the New England Wild Flower Society lists it as rare in New England, and it is considered a plant of "Concern" by R.I.'s Natural Heritage Program.

I first grew Butterfly Weed in Kingston, using seeds from a friend's garden. That plant moved with us to our sandy, acid soil in Hopkinton and was the forebear of all the Butterfly Weed plants, of all shades, now found in our yard. It was not as easy to cultivate as Hal Bruce (2) maintains, nor have I ever seen 70 stems before or after transplanting! The plants put into newer beds are dwindling in number each year, and the seedlings have perished (they may have been too far from an adequate watering source in that critical time after setting out). I am convinced that *Asclepias tuberosa* has a mind of its own, because the plants still grow where they were first established. They are clearly the winner in this struggle with nature called "gardening." My garden plans have changed to suit the plants, and those stunning Butterfly Weeds will give me joy wherever they choose to grow.

## CULTIVATION NOTES

*Asclepias tuberosa* L. Butterfly Weed

Perennial. Blooms July-August. Flowers orange-red to bright yellow. Plant height 1-3 feet. Narrow, hairy alternate leaves (opposite on branches). Found in full sun to light shade along roadsides, pastures and edges of woods in average well-drained, slightly acid soil.

### Seed Collection:

Pods should be collected when they first begin to split, approximately 8 weeks after flowering. The seeds should be brown. Harry Phillips (1) recommends that the seeds be cleaned by carefully splitting the green pod and removing the seeds and down, then firmly pulling the down from the seeds. The seeds may be sown immediately or stored dry in the refrigerator in a sealed, labeled container.

### Propagation:

**Seeds in flats:** Sow in a gritty mix of four parts sand to two parts peat to one part compost, leaf mold, or Jiffy Mix. Transplant to a 4-inch pot when the second set of true leaves appears. Move to a permanent place in the garden when the plants are established and growing.

**Seeds in ground:** Fresh seeds may be sown directly in the garden where they are to be grown; the ground must be kept moist.

**Terminal stem cuttings:** Cuttings three to four inches in length can be taken before flowering. Remove half the leaves and insert the cuttings in pure sand or a mix of equal parts peat and sand. Put in a plastic bag to maintain high humidity. Cuttings should be ready for potting within six weeks. (1)

**Root cuttings:** In the fall take up a mature plant from the garden and cut the taproot into 2-inch sections. Position each section vertically in a sandy rooting mix outdoors and keep the area slightly moistened. (1)

### Cultivation:

"Butterfly Weed thrives in ordinary soil and open exposures, but will tolerate light shade. The soil should be well-drained and mulching is not advised. Once established, benign neglect with only occasional extra water or fertilizer may prove the best caretaker." (1)

### My own notes:

### References:

- (1) Phillips, Harry R. 1985. *Growing and Propagating Wild Flowers*. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill.
- (2) Bruce, Hal. 1976. *How to Grow Wildflowers and Wild Shrubs and Trees in Your Own Garden*. Alfred A. Knopf, NY.
- (3) Brumback, W. D. Longland. 1986. *Garden in the Woods Cultivation Guide*. New England Wild Flower Society, Framingham, MA.

### Other sources of information about Butterfly Weed:

- House, M. B. 1986. *The Joy of Wildflowers*. Prentice Hall Press, NY.
- Sperka, Marie. 1973. *Growing Wildflowers: A Gardener's Guide*. Charles Scribner's Sons, NY.
- Steffek, E.F. 1983. *The New Wild Flowers and How to Grow Them*. Timber Press, Portland, OR.
- Stuckey, I.H. 1967. *Rhode Island Wildflowers*. University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, TN.
- Taylor, K.S. and S. F. Hamblin. 1963. *Handbook of Wild Flower Cultivation*. Collier Books, NY.
- Illustration from Mrs. Dana's *How to Know the Wildflowers*, Dover Publications, Inc., NY.