

## 2017 Perennial Plant of the Year Asclepias tuberosa-Butterfly Weed

*Sandy Welches, MGV 2005*

"With all the 'buzz' about bees and butterflies." the Perennial Plant Association has announced this excellent plant known for supporting insects and birds and serving as the primary caterpillar food for our beloved North American native butterfly as its 2017



Plant of the Year. In addition to being butterfly magnets, *Asclepias tuberosa* have a medicinal history as treatment for pleurisy, a common ailment in early colonial times, causing wheezing, coughing and great pain due to the inflammation of the lining of the lungs.

Butterfly weed is a member of *Apocynaceae*, or milkweed family. This family includes plants with a milky sap poisonous to most insects. Unlike other milkweeds, *Asclepias tuberosa* contain little sap, and are thus attractive to insects, birds and butterflies.

Butterfly weed flowers are easy to recognize because of their "5 up & 5 down" appearance. Each flower has 5 colorful petals that hang down, and 5 upright curved petals called hoods. When cross-pollinated, a dry fruit forms on the plant, and it is this fruit that opens along one side to disperse the plant's seeds. Deadheading is recommended to prevent reseeding, keeping plants more attractive and promoting a second push of color later in the season.

*Asclepias tuberosa* makes excellent, long-lasting cut flowers. Cut stems when more than half the flowers are open; buds do not open well once the stem is cut.

Sealing the cut end is not necessary to prevent sap from seeping out of the stem. Instead, cut flowers have a good vase life if they are immediately placed in warm water after cutting and either placing stems in a refrigerator for 12 hours or transferring the stems to cold water.

Butterfly weed pairs well with summer-blooming Phlox, *Hemerocallis*, *Liatris*, *Echinacea* and *Salvia*. Another bonus is that deer will leave *Asclepias tuberosa* alone!



### What We Need to Know

*Hardiness*—USDA Zones 4 to 9

*Light*—Butterfly weed grows best in full sun.

*Soil*—Well-drained soil and it is drought tolerant.

*Unique qualities*—*Asclepias tuberosa* are butterfly magnets. Flowers are a nectar source for many butterflies, and leaves are food for the monarch butterfly caterpillars.

*Maintenance*—Butterfly weed is subject to no serious insect or disease problem and deer usually avoid them. [www.theherbexchange.com](http://www.theherbexchange.com)

<http://www.perennialplant.org/index.php/education/plant-of-the-year>