

GIANT MILKWEED

The Giant Milkweed is a plant that grows next to roads and in open fields and scrublands. It gets its name from the milky-white juice or sap found in the leaves and stem. The milkweed plant is visited by many insects, small animals and birds.

This plant is known by many names; in English it is the Giant Milkweed, Yakka Gida in Kannada and Aak in Hindi. What name is this plant known by where you live?

The white sap can be unsafe for you and other animals if eaten in large quantities. This is one way the plant protects itself from insects and animals that like to eat its leaves. The sap can also irritate your skin and eyes. Always wash your hands well with soap and water after touching the leaves or bark of this plant.

Can you think of other ways in which plants protect themselves from people and animals?

LEAVES

The leaves are soft, oval and pale green. You might find a striped caterpillar munching on the leaves. This is the caterpillar of a Plain Tiger Butterfly. Milkweed is a 'host plant' for these butterflies. This means that the butterflies lay their eggs on these leaves. Once the caterpillars emerge from the eggs they eat the leaves.

Look at the butterfly closely, what colours do you observe? Why do you think it shares a part of its name with the Tiger?

FLOWERS

Milkweed flowers are light purple in colour. Many people think the flowers look like a crown - which is why the milkweed plant is also called the Crown Flower.

The large blue-black noisy carpenter bee, butterflies, beetles, fruit flies and wasps are just some of the insects that visit the flower.



FRUIT AND SEEDS

Inside the fruit or seed pod of the milkweed plant you can find small, flat seeds. Each seed has a white tail of hair-like fibres. Some birds use these white, fluffy hairs to make their nests soft and comfortable for their chicks. When the seed pod opens, these little seeds float away to grow wherever the wind carries them.

If you find a milkweed seed, place it on your palm and gently blow. Does it float in the air?

STEM AND BARK

The strong, sap-filled stems of this plant spread out close to the base of the plant. Look closely at a broken stem or leaf - do you see the sap oozing out?

You might see shiny blue milkweed beetles, or a colourful painted grasshopper hiding among the stems. The painted grasshopper eats the sap-filled leaves of this plant which makes it harmful to other animals that may want to eat it. Its bright colours warn other animals that it is unsafe to eat!

You may also spot aphids - tiny white or yellow insects that live on the leaves and stems. Near them, you are sure to see some ants. Ants and aphids have an interesting friendship - the aphids suck the sap of the plant and put out sweet waste called 'honeydew' which the ants love to drink. To say thank you, the ants protect the aphids from other insects that like to eat them.

Observe a milkweed plant nearby - you will see many other creatures, small and big! Make a list or draw the visitors you see.

