

THE SYRIAN MILKWEED

How *Asclepias syriaca* L. acquired its inappropriate name.



By
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The common eastern milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca* L.) occurs throughout the northeastern quarter of the United States and in adjacent areas of Canada. It grows from northern Maine down to about the Virginia—North Carolina border and westward from the Atlantic seaboard across the Mississippi River to about the center of the plains states, where it is replaced by the vegetatively-similar showy milkweed (*A. speciosa* Torr.). Originally a denizen of rich prairies, meadows and riverbanks, it now inhabits the surrogate prairies along highways and fencerows, and in pastures. People who live in this large area and have an interest in its natural history will have some familiarity with this plant and may have wondered how a strictly-North American plant came to be named after a country where it does not even occur.

When you consult the 8th edition (1950) of **Gray's Manual of Botany**, you are told that the plant was "early carried from eastern America to southern Europe and supposed by Linnaeus to have come from the Orient". But why should he have thought so...unless there is another species of milkweed that does grow in the Orient and that could be confused with the North American species. And that was indeed the case.

In the first edition (1753) of **Species Plantarum** [The Species of Plants], Carl Linnaeus said:

"**Asclepias syriaca** with oval leaves tomentose below, with an unbranched stem, with nodding umbels.
[identical to] **Apocynum majus Syriacum rectum**. On page 90 of Cornut's *Canadensium Plantarum Historia* (1635).
[identical to] **Apocynum syriacum**. On page 80, vol. 2 of L'Escluse's *Rariorum Plantarum Historia* (1601).
It grows in Virginia. Perennial."

Hence, Linnaeus believed that his plant was the same as two other previously-described ones and that he was merely changing the genus of the L'Escluse species from **Apocynum** to **Asclepias**; he therefore retained the epithet **syriaca**. But why did he retain the epithet if he believed it only to have been introduced there from Virginia? And how could the North American plant have gotten to the Middle East and have been well-established there by 1592? Was the Cornut plant really the same as the L'Escluse plant, and was the Linnaean plant the same as both of them? To answer these questions, it is necessary to go back a century before the earliest days of modern botany.