



Growing native milkweed plants from rhizomes

Southern Oregon Monarch Advocates

www.somonarchs.org

Tom D. Landis

E-mail: nurseries@aol.com

For general monarch-related questions, contact
CalLee Davenport: callee_davenport@fws.gov.



1. Why use rhizomes? Milkweed rhizomes are actually underground stems (Figure 1A) and can be used to propagate both narrowleaf and showy milkweeds. Rhizomes contain buds (Figure 1B) that will spout into new plants (Figure 1C). Plants started from rhizomes will grow faster and larger than those from seeds. Showy milkweed propagated from seeds will generally not flower the first season, but plants grown from rhizomes often flower and produce seeds.



Figure 1 – Milkweeds, like this showy milkweed, produce rhizomes just below the soil surface (A - left). Milkweed rhizomes contain both shoot and root buds (B - middle), which will spout after transplanting (C - right) and can be used to propagate new plants.

2. Collecting rhizomes. The best time to collect rhizomes is during the late fall to early spring when the buds are dormant and the rhizomes contain high levels of stored energy. You can locate milkweed plants during the winter by looking for the dried shoots and seed pods.

Milkweed rhizomes grow horizontally under the soil, generally in the top 4 to 8 inches (10.2 to 20.3 cm). It's best to collect some soil around the rhizomes to protect the fine roots. If that's not possible, just be careful not to damage the rhizomes and cut them into sections. Rhizome sections as short as 2 inches (5 cm) can be used as propagules. Place the sections into a bucket with water to rehydrate them and prevent undue moisture stress.

It's ideal to transplant the rhizomes right away but, if that's not possible, they can be stored in a

plastic bag in the refrigerator. When storing rhizomes, let the sections surface-dry to prevent mold or decay. If storing for extended periods, place some damp peat moss around the rhizome sections to prevent desiccation.

3. Planting options for milkweed rhizomes

3.1. Transplanting outside. Planting in late winter or early spring is best; transplanting during the growing season is possible if occasional irrigation is provided. Dig a hole and place the rhizome section at the same depth it was in the wild with the buds facing up. Cover rhizomes with 1 to 2 inches (2.5 to 5.1 cm) of soil, and compact firmly to eliminate air pockets.

3.2 Planting into raised garden beds or containers. You'll have better success if you plant the rhizome sections into garden beds (Figure 2A) or containers to allow them to grow new roots and shoots before outplanting. In garden beds, the rhizomes will produce shoots after several weeks but these shoots will remain small while a new root system is being developed (Figure 2B). Drip irrigation and occasional liquid fertilization will speed plant development, but don't overwater which can encourage decay. Use well drained soils and keep plants "moist, but not wet".

Planting rhizome sections in containers can be very productive. Milkweeds develop roots slowly so it may take several months to produce a firm root plug, depending on the size of the container. I've had good success by sticking rhizome sections into large Jiffy containers (Figure 2C) because the mesh outer covering prevents the soil from falling off the roots. Usually a couple of months is sufficient before the new milkweeds are ready to be outplanted.



Figure 2 – Transplanting rhizomes into raised garden beds (A - upper left) allows new roots and shoots (B - lower left) to develop before outplanting. Growing rhizomes in containers is very effective, especially those with stabilized media like Jiffy pellets (C –upper right).