

The Weekly Plant

10 April 2016

Common names: climbing milkweed, fringed twinevine

Scientific name: *Funastrum cynanchoides* var. *hartwegii* (formerly *Sarcostemma cynanchoides* var. *hartwegii*). Some experts treat this as a separate species: *Funastrum hartwegii*¹

In our Community: near the two yellow & black poles to south of fire hydrant and driveway to lots 45-48, across Galileo from lot 172.

Discussion

Vines can be a blessing or a curse in a garden. They can hide the ugly, ornament a blank wall, and shade your patio. They can cover your trees, smother your cactus, and sometimes literally choke the life out of your plants. And sometimes, they can provide food for the caterpillars of queen butterflies.

Climbing milkweed is indeed a larval food plant for queens, but otherwise it seems to fall on the curse side of the vine spectrum. It's a perennial twining vine that will make thick ropes by twining around itself or twine around the stems of other plants. It can climb to 6 feet, enough to go up, over, and around any number of small shrubs (or cactus). I've been told it is exceptionally hard to kill.



You'll find climbing milkweed in Arizona, New Mexico, California, Texas, and adjacent Mexico. In the Village it grows in the washes and in just-a-bit-damper-than-average locations. You may find it going up bushes and trees or twining around itself to form a small clump of densely tangled stems.



The opposite leaves are shaped like exceptionally narrow, elongated arrowheads, 1-2 inches long but usually less than 1/3 inch wide. The flowers are held in small clusters about an inch wide. The five petals are flushed with purple and fringed with hairs. A broken stem oozes a white sap, the "milk" in the milkweed.

Though you might not want to grow this one, vines are a great addition to a garden. Think about whether the vine is annual or perennial (you'll have to tear down the annual vine each year) and if it is evergreen or deciduous (deciduous vines are leafless in winter, perhaps not the look you are after). Pay special attention to how the vine climbs. Twiners, such as chocolate vine (*Akebia*), clematis, honeysuckle, passionflower, yellow butterfly vine and crossvine, need a trellis or other thin support to climb. Vines that form adhesive

rootlets or pads need something to stick onto. They'll climb up solid surfaces such as walls, making repainting difficult and often leaving behind rootlets or pads. This includes vines such as creeping fig, to some extent crossvine, euonymus, English ivy, and poison ivy.

¹ The nomenclature is somewhat confused. See <http://www.phytologia.org/uploads/2/3/4/2/23422706/90136-40turnerfunstrum.pdf> for discussion.

Above: twined rope made of climbing milkweed stems; long but narrow, opposite leaves. Note drop of milky sap at base of petiole.

Right: Funastrum cynanchoides var. cynanchoides. This variety of climbing milkweed has larger flower heads with mostly white flowers (but the petals are still fringed with hairs) and much larger leaves. It does not flower until late summer. Photo taken at UA

Photos and text by
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