

Commercial Milkweed Production

Milkweed ([Asclepias tuberosa](#)) has long been viewed as a serious weed problem in agricultural systems in Vermont and much of the U.S. Farmers have fought to keep the weed out of their crop fields to avoid crop yield losses. The introduction of herbicide resistant crops have allowed farmers to more easily and constantly control weeds including milkweed. This has led to a severe decline in the milkweed population across the U.S. However, this eradication has come at a hefty ecological cost. The native plant is the sole food source for the Monarch butterfly caterpillar which utilizes the milkweed's toxic sap as protection from predators. Removing this food source has led to a severe decline in Monarch populations.

Conservation efforts are now being made to protect milkweed in hopes of increasing the Monarch population.

To support these conservation efforts, UVM Extension Northwest Crops and Soils Program (NWCS) has been investigating methods and feasibility of producing milkweed as a commercial crop. Like any crop, there needs to be a market for the product in order for it to be a viable candidate. Recently, a Canadian company has developed milkweed fiber processing technologies to create new milkweed fiber products. The fiber that is used comes mainly from the "floss", the white fluffy strands that emerge from the pods in the fall. Strands of the floss are hollow and covered in a waxy substance. These unique properties make the fiber extremely warm, water repellent, light, and able to absorb high volumes of oily substances. Oil absorbent products that can be used in chemical spill kits as an alternative to the fossil fuel based synthetic materials are currently being produced and used in Canada. In addition, high-end winter clothing companies are interested in using milkweed floss as an alternative to goose down. There are also opportunities to create stiff, particleboard type materials to be used in countless applications.

To support this emerging industry, a Canadian farmer cooperative, Monark Cooperative, has formed and is looking to expand into Vermont. The cooperative provides seed, technical assistance, and harvesting equipment to cooperative members under 10-year milkweed production contracts. For more information on the co-op, visit [monarkcooperative.com](#)