

“Uncommon Invertebrates”

Milkweed Bugs and Beetles by Diane Fenno

The milkweed plant is the host for Monarch caterpillars which feed on the leaves and flowers of milkweed plants. The sap is also used by their bodies to make the monarchs distasteful to many predators. They are also susceptible to pests; this report will discuss two of the most predominate milkweed pests.

The adult **milkweed bug**, *Oncopeltus fasciatus*, is orange-red and black and is a sucking insect. It will feed on the leaves, stems, and seeds of the plant. It uses the sap to create toxic compounds in its body. They can be found in mid to late summer. Their eggs are a light lemon yellow color which changes to a reddish hue. Eggs are laid in the seed pods and about 30 eggs are laid daily. A female can lay about 2,000 eggs in a month. The nymphs look like the adults.

Milkweed bugs do little damage and are only around for a short time. Adults have a life span of about a month. You can live with the bugs or remove them and toss them in a container of soapy water. Insecticidal soaps are effective and safe but you must cover the insects thoroughly. Be sure to remove leaf litter and spent stalks in the fall to eliminate overwintering areas.

Milkweed beetles, *Tetraopes tetrophthalmus*, have red bodies, red wings with black spots, and long black antennae. The adults feed on the leaves and buds and lay eggs on the stems. Eggs are laid on plant stems near the ground, because the larvae eat milkweed roots. The larvae overwinter in the roots and pupate in the spring. In early summer the adults emerge. The beetles do not harm monarch butterflies.

The milkweed bugs and beetles are colored black, red, and orange to warn predators about their toxic and bitter taste. This type of defense mechanism is called "aposematism". The toxin is called cardiac glycoside and is sucked from the milkweed plant.



Milkweed beetle



Milkweed bug

Photo Credit: wimastergardener.org

Photo Credit: bugoftheweek.com

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