

# Nature's Bounty

By JJ Murphy

## Field Identification: How to Tell Milkweed from Dogbane



JJ Murphy

As we crossed a sunny field with milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*) and dogbane (*Apocynum cannabinum*) growing in abundance, an animated conversation ensued as to which was which. Studying a plant in all seasons provides a valuable opportunity to note similarities and differences.

Yes, dogbane and milkweed do grow together, as shown in the accompanying photo. This spring scene reveals the subtle differences in the size and shape of the leaves, but other features provide a more readily visible distinction in the field. In this field, it was obvious that some plants had smooth stems and some had fine hairs.

*The Forager's Harvest*, by Sam Thayer, has a very handy chart listing the basic field identifiers between the two. Here are a few highlights:

- Milkweed has fine hairs on the stem and leaf bottom. Dogbane stem and leaf surfaces are smooth.
- Milkweed has few, if any buds on its leaf axils. Dogbane has many leaf axils with buds.
- Milkweed leaves do not squeak when rubbed together. Dogbane leaves squeak when rubbed together.
- Milkweed leaves are smaller ascending the stalk, larger lower on the stalk. Dogbane leaves are slightly larger ascending the stalk, smaller at base.

- Milkweed stalks are hollow and green inside. Dogbane stalks are solid and white or cream inside.
- Milkweed stalks are slightly squared in cross section. Dogbane stalks are round in cross section.
- Milkweed exudes lots of milky latex sap. Dogbane exudes a little bit of milky latex sap.

The only way to learn field characteristics is to spend time in the field, note details of the plant, fungus or animal and consult many experts for references to these details.

Sometimes diligence and "dirt time" rewards us with a clear identification. Often, it's like being a detective, with the answer revealed months or years later. One of my foraging mentors, Gary Lincoff, points out that the most difficult field distinction between milkweed and dogbane is the young shoots. That is the least interesting part of the plant to eat. By the time the young flower buds and young seed pods form, it is much easier to see the difference between the two and those parts are really delicious.

As knowledge is gained and information updated, many ideas once thought to be true are now considered false. Distinguishing milkweed from dogbane has moved milkweed from inedible to edible for many foragers.

That said, the best way to prepare the tiny green flower buds is to steam them and enjoy them with olive oil or butter. Once the buds start to open it's too late to eat them.

As for the milkweed pods, choose the ones that are firm with no resistance. Open the

green outer husk and remove the white inner part. The immature seeds should be tightly packed, with no "fluff." Bring water to a boil and immerse the seed heads for 30-60 seconds. Remove, drain and chop. Heat olive oil or butter and add chopped seed heads. Stir and they will develop the texture of string cheese. Add to a pasta sauce for a vegan meal.


*JJ Murphy has been eating wild foods since her farmer parents pulled weeds from the veggie garden and she ate the weeds. JJ continues to forage and write in Highland Mills, NY, posting recipes and resource information at www.WriterByNature.com.*



The plant on the left is dogbane, on the right is milkweed.

Photo by JJ Murphy

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