Growing milkweed plants from seeds by Thomas D. Landis

1. Seed treatments before sowing - Milkweed seeds need to be rinsed in running water to clean away any fungus spores or bacteria. So, put the seeds in a small mesh bag or sprout jar in the kitchen sink and let the cool water bubble through the seeds for about 30 to 45 minutes (Figure 1A) and down the drain. This not only cleanses the seeds but lets them absorb water - the first step in the germination process.

Native plant seeds, including many milkweeds, are dormant and require a cold, moist period before they can germinate; this exposure happens naturally during winter. Stratification is a nursery term that describes the combined use of moisture and cold temperatures to overcome seed dormancy. Sandwich stratification is the best procedure for small amounts of seeds. Use a single sheet of industrial paper towel or a stack of kitchen towels and moisten it completely. The idea is “moist, but not wet”.

Spread seeds one layer deep on 1/4 of the moist paper towel. Fold the paper towel over the seeds (Figure 1B), and place the sandwich into a clear, plastic zip-lock type bag and put them into a refrigerator.

Check occasionally to ensure seeds are moist and not moldy. If mold develops, remove the sandwich, open it, and rinse the seeds under cool, running tap water. Wash out the zip-lock type bag with warm water and soap. Spread seeds onto a new stack of moistened paper towels, put the sandwich back into the bag, and refrigerate. Keep checking the seeds every week or so until they begin to germinate (Figure 1C).
2. Sowing options for milkweed seeds

2.1 Direct seeding outside. You can plant milkweed seeds in the fall or winter so that they will undergo natural stratification before germinating the following Spring. It’s still a good idea to cleanse the seeds with a running water rinse before sowing, and then covering the seeds with the thin mulch. Milkweed seeds should be sown very shallow - less than ½ inch.

2.2 Sowing seeds or germinants in containers. If you stratified your milkweed seed, you can just sow them as they germinate (Figure 1C). Be sure to orient the new root downwards. If you don’t seed any seeds germinating after 6-8 weeks of stratification, go ahead and sow several seeds per container. I recommend using a Jiffy pellet because young milkweed seedlings don’t form a firm root plug that is easy to extract and transplant (Figure 2A). Cover the seeds with a thin layer of fine-textured mulch or sand to protect the seed and hold it in place.

3. Other tips - Plant in sunny locations. Milkweed plants can spread by rhizomes, so growing them in raised beds or large containers is best. Irrigation during the first season isn’t absolutely necessary but will results in larger, healthier plants. If you aren’t going to collect seeds, clipping the wilted flowers will keep the plants blooming and providing nectar to monarchs and other pollinators later in the season. Clipping seed pods (“follicles”) before they mature will prevent milkweed seeds from blowing all over.