

This Winter's Hot Fashion: Parkas Stuffed With Vermont Weeds

New England farmers despise milkweed—but as its fibers become a ‘plant-based’ alternative used in winter clothing, they’re trying to warm up to it



Roger Rainville in his Vermont milkweed field. Photo: Amanda Gervais

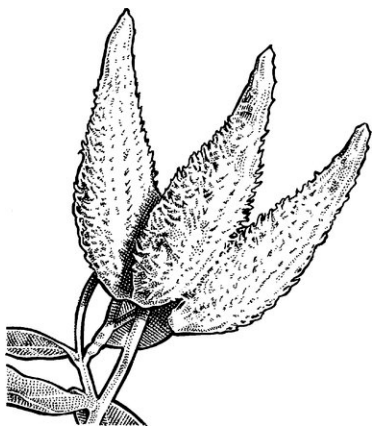
By

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Each fall, as foliage turns and Vermont teems with tourists, the state’s farmers take pride in showing off their fetching fields of hay and corn. In the slanting sun, the crops call to mind the heyday of impressionist painters.

Take a closer look, and you may see something they’re a little less proud off—fields of milkweed, sometimes strategically tucked out of view.



Thanks to Canadian clothing companies, some farmers in this bucolic state are setting aside acreage—and their aesthetic biases—to cultivate a homely weed they have long considered a menace to kill at all cost.

With its warts, a messy sap that can sicken livestock and a tendency to grow in tall, mangy clumps that crowd out other plants, milkweed doesn't enjoy a history of immortalization in oil paint.

Milkweed does eventually sprout fragrant flowers. But by season's end, notes one gardening website, it looks like it got "hit with the ugly stick."

Let the plant grow on purpose, Vermont farmer Andre Quintin says, and "it looks like you don't know what the hell you're doing."

That is, until harvest rolls around these days.



Milkweed pod. Photo: Getty Images/iStock photo

Some makers of winter clothing are touting the white wispy floss in milkweed pods as a plant-based insulating material. Some forecasters say milkweed could yield \$800 an acre this year, which Vermont farmers say is better than they get for most commodities.

Heather Darby, a University of Vermont agronomist who is pushing farmers to plant milkweed as protection against volatile milk and grain prices, gives a presentation to prospective growers on "the five stages of dealing with milkweed."

Her approach is modeled on a well-known psychological program for dealing with grief. "The biggest barrier the farmers have is trying to overcome how they feel about the plant itself," she says. As a crop, "it looks like hell."

Growers who let milkweed run rampant have long been considered poor farmers. Fretting about what passersby will think, Mr. Quintin, 46, tucks his milkweed crop on his "back 40," he says, "so no one can see it from the road."



Mr. Rainville and University of Vermont agronomist Heather Darby inspect milkweed pods.
Photo: Thomas Jansen-Lonnquist

Among milkweed skeptics is Ken Van Hazinga, 65, who grows grain and hay in Shoreham, Vt., and says he couldn't warm to farming it himself. He is trying not to judge peers who do. "There is no accounting for taste," he says. "Some people might like this plant."

Common milkweed, concentrated east of the Rockies and in southern Canada, has a burgeoning market thanks to a handful of Canadian companies and a farmers' co-op that have seized on the idea of stuffing jackets, mittens and other products with its fibers.

A new limited-edition milkweed-packed parka from Quartz Co., based near Montreal, did well enough last winter that the company will roll it out to 10 retailers this year, says its president, Jean-Philippe Robert.

Quartz's 'Dorset' parka, available with milkweed insulation. Photo: Quartz Co.

Jaunty enough for the city and practical enough for the weekend cabin, he says, the "refined Canadian parka" sells for \$850, the same as Quartz's duck-down jacket. He says down is still popular but milkweed attracts customers intrigued by a "plant-based" insulator. "We were shocked by the interest we got."

Another company has crafted a milkweed snow suit. The Canadian Coast Guard says it recently tested milkweed-insulated parkas, gloves, mittens and coveralls but hasn't yet disclosed its findings.

It's rare for farmers to intentionally grow what are otherwise considered weeds for commercial uses, says Lee Van Wychen, science policy director for the Weed Science Society of America.

Perhaps the "weed" in milkweed is no longer deserved, says John Hayden, a 60-year-old Jeffersonville, Vt., fruit farmer who is growing milkweed and says the plant needs an image makeover. After all, a weed is essentially a wild plant growing where it's not wanted. He isn't sure his willfully grown milkweed qualifies. "We should change the name to 'milkflower.' "

Milkweed's sartorial use harks at least to World War II, when overseas supplies of kapok, an insulating fiber, were cut off. As a wartime substitute, the U.S. rallied civilians to pick milkweed pods for life jackets, says Gerald Wykes, a historian at the Monroe County Museum in Michigan.

After the war, for the most part milkweed went "back to its roots" as a humble weed, he says, because the ornery plant proved challenging to tame as a crop that could be grown in rows and harvested mechanically. The handpicking that went on in the war "wasn't terribly efficient," he says, and the rising use of synthetics lessened interest in all natural fibers.

Recently, says Ms. Darby, farmers have improved machinery that is designed to gently pick off milkweed pods without damaging the whole plant.

And milkweed has recently sprouted back into favor in some quarters because of its role not just as a green stuffing option but also as the key source of food for caterpillars of the embattled monarch butterfly.

There are now more than 2,000 acres of milkweed planted in Vermont and Quebec, although in Vermont, where efforts are newer, "most of the fields are kind of hidden right now," Ms. Darby says.

"To be planting your biggest enemy," she says, "you don't really want people to know you're doing that."

Bob Buermann, 60, a sheep farmer in South Hero, Vt., says his milkweed is along a well-traveled road, and he isn't getting rave reviews. "It looks really grungy."



Bob Buermann's milkweed field. Photo: Bob Buermann

A milkweed nightmare jolted Vermont farmer Roger Rainville, 63, from sleep one night. Mr. Rainville, who has 60 acres of milkweed, raises cattle and grows hay along the Canadian border, dreamed he had devalued his land by blanketing it with weeds and that he had ventured outside into air filled with milkweed fluff.

In real life, after his dream, he broke down and mowed one of his milkweed plantings that was near the road. He couldn't stand the way it looked.

"If you drive by a farmer and see they've got milkweed growing everywhere, you think he's lost it," Mr. Rainville says. "My father is rolling over in his grave, I swear to God."