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CRAMER, GARY LYNN

BIOLOGY AND CONTROL OF COMMON MILKWEED

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PREVIEW

BIOLOGY AND CONTROL OF COMMON MILKWEED

by

Gary L. Cramer

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**BY**

Gary L. Cramer

**APPROVED**

**DATE**

Professor Orvin C. Burnside

12/15/80

Professor M. K. McCarty

12/15/80

Professor J. M. Daly

12/15/80

Professor Herman Knoche

12/15/80

Professor Lloyd Haderlie

12/15/80

**SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE**

**GRADUATE COLLEGE**

**UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA**

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PREVIEW

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
A. Distribution, Interference, and Biology of Common Milkweed ( <i>Asclepias syriaca</i> ) in Nebraska . . . . .	1
Abstract . . . . .	1
Introduction . . . . .	2
Materials and Methods . . . . .	3
Roadside survey . . . . .	3
Competition experiments . . . . .	3
Conductivity and pH . . . . .	4
Repeated leaching . . . . .	5
Aqueous extracts . . . . .	5
Residue decomposition . . . . .	6
Stairstep experiment . . . . .	6
Results and Discussion . . . . .	7
Roadside survey . . . . .	7
Competition experiments . . . . .	8
Conductivity and pH . . . . .	9
Repeated leaching . . . . .	10
Aqueous extracts . . . . .	10
Residue decomposition . . . . .	11
Stairstep experiment . . . . .	11
Literature Cited . . . . .	13
B. Control of Common Milkweed ( <i>Asclepias syriaca</i> ) . . . . .	27
Abstract . . . . .	27
Introduction . . . . .	28
Materials and Methods . . . . .	29
Postemergence seedling control . . . . .	29
Clipping experiment . . . . .	30
Absorption and translocation . . . . .	31
Time of treatment . . . . .	32
Time of tillage . . . . .	33
Plowing versus discing . . . . .	34
Glove treatments . . . . .	35
Broadcast versus roller application of herbicides . . . . .	35

Results and Discussion . . . . .	Page 36
Postemergence seedling control . . . . .	36
Clipping experiment . . . . .	37
Absorption and translocation . . . . .	38
Time of treatment . . . . .	39
Time of tillage . . . . .	41
Plowing versus discing . . . . .	41
Glove treatments . . . . .	42
Broadcast versus roller application of herbicides . . . . .	42
Literature Cited . . . . .	44

PREVIEW

## LIST OF TABLES

	Page
<u>Table A1.</u> Percentage of land use categories infested with common milkweed during 1976 through 1979 as determined by visual observations along three highway routes starting from Lincoln, Nebraska . . . . .	14
<u>Table A2.</u> Effect of common milkweed infestations as compared with non-infested areas in corn, sorghum, and soybean fields on crop stand, protein content, and yield during 1976 through 1979 in eastern Nebraska . . . . .	15
<u>Table A3.</u> Effect of various populations of common milkweed on grain yield of corn, sorghum, and soybeans during 1976 through 1979 in eastern Nebraska . . . . .	17
<u>Table A4.</u> Effect of germination solution conductivity on germination percentage, hypocotyl length, and radicle length of common milkweed and sorghum after 7 days in a laboratory germinator operated at an alternating 20 C for 16 h of darkness and 30 C for 8 h of light . . . . .	18
<u>Table A5.</u> Effect of germination solution pH on germination percentage, hypocotyl length, and radicle length of common milkweed and sorghum after 7 days in a laboratory germinator operated at an alternating 20 C for 16 h of darkness and 30 C for 8 h of light . . . . .	19
<u>Table A6.</u> Effect of repeated leaching in the greenhouse of a modified Hoagland's nutrient solution through washed sand or Sharpsburg silty clay loam on the pH and conductivity of the leachate . . . . .	20
<u>Table A7.</u> Effect of water extracts of ground common milkweed on germination percentage, hypocotyl length, and radicle length of common milkweed and sorghum 7 and 14 days after germination in a laboratory germinator operated at an alternating 20 C for 16 h of darkness and 30 C for 8 h of light . . . . .	21



<u>Table A8.</u>	Effect of common milkweed shoot residues on plant height and dry-weight of sorghum grown in Sharpsburg silty clay loam in the greenhouse . . . . .	23
<u>Table A9.</u>	Effect of common milkweed root residues on plant height and dry-weight of sorghum grown in Sharpsburg silty clay loam in the greenhouse . . . . .	24
<u>Table A10.</u>	Effect of leachate from washed sand and a 50:50 sand:Sharpsburg silty clay loam mixture containing living and dead common milkweed, ground to pass through a 2 mm screen, on sorghum growth in the greenhouse . . . . .	25
<u>Table A11.</u>	Effect of leachate from washed sand and a 50:50 sand:Sharpsburg silty clay loam mixture containing living and dead common milkweed, ground to pass through a 2 mm screen, on germination percentage, hypocotyl length, and radicle length of sorghum 7 days after germination in a laboratory germinator operated at an alternating 20 C for 16 hr of darkness and 30 C for 8 hr of light . . . . .	26
<u>Table B1.</u>	Control of 6-week-old greenhouse grown common milkweed seedlings with postemergence applications of herbicides applied alone or in combination in 187 L/ha of water carrier	46
<u>Table B2.</u>	Effect of postemergence herbicides commonly used in corn, sorghum, or soybeans on subsequent regrowth of 6-week-old common milkweed seedlings in the greenhouse . . . . .	48
<u>Table B3.</u>	Effect of top-growth removal at various intervals after herbicide treatment on resprouting time and fresh weight regrowth of 6-week-old common milkweed seedlings grown in the greenhouse . . . . .	50
<u>Table B4.</u>	Absorption and distribution of $^{14}\text{C}$ from foliar-applied $^{14}\text{C}$ -2,4-D and $^{14}\text{C}$ -glyphosate various days after treatment of third and fifth node leaves of hydroponically-grown common milkweed seedlings in the greenhouse . . . . .	52

	Page
<u>Table B5.</u> Common milkweed control as compared with the untreated check 1 yr after herbicides were applied postemergence at early and late bud growth stages in fallowed fields near Lincoln, Nebraska during 1976 and 1978 . . . . .	54
<u>Table B6.</u> Common milkweed control as compared with the untreated check 1 yr after herbicides were applied postemergence at three stages of growth in winter wheat stubble near Lincoln, Nebraska during August 16-29, 1978 . . . . .	56
<u>Table B7.</u> Common milkweed control as compared with the initial stand counts from herbicides applied postemergence and then plowed at various intervals after spraying near Lincoln, Nebraska during 1976 and 1978 . . . . .	57
<u>Table B8.</u> Effect of plowing and discing June 15, 1979 on common milkweed populations as compared with the initial stand counts under dryland and irrigated conditions at Lincoln, Nebraska . . . . .	58
<u>Table B9.</u> Average control of common milkweed when herbicides were applied in September with a herbicide glove at two locations near Lincoln, Nebraska during 1975 and 1976 . . . . .	59
<u>Table B10.</u> Control of common milkweed as effected by different herbicides and application method at Lincoln, Nebraska during June 1978 . . . . .	60

A. Distribution, Interference, and Biology of  
Common Milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*) in Nebraska

Abstract. The greatest infestations of common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca* L.), in descending order, occurred on areas occupied by soybeans [*Glycine max* (L.) Merr.], oats (*Avena sativa* L.), railroad rights-of-way, sorghum [*Sorghum bicolor* (L.) Moench], fallow land, roadsides, corn (*Zea mays* L.) winter wheat (*Triticum aestivum* L.), pasture, and alfalfa (*Medicago sativa* L.) Average common milkweed populations in row crops of eastern Nebraska ranged from 11,100 to 45,200 plants/ha. Average yield reductions in common milkweed infested areas of the fields ranged from 2 to 10% for corn, 4 to 29% for sorghum, and 12 to 19% for soybeans. Reductions in yields tended to increase with increasing common milkweed populations. Germination percentage of common milkweed and sorghum were not significantly affected by growing medium conductivities below 7 and 13 mmhos/cm<sup>2</sup>, respectively. Growth media of pH 2 significantly reduced germination percentage, hypocotyl length, and radicle length of both common milkweed and sorghum as compared with a pH of 4 to 10. Undiluted aqueous extracts of common milkweed shoot and root material significantly reduced germination percentage, hypocotyl length, and radicle length of sorghum. However, decomposition of common milkweed residues in soil for up to 5 months did not adversely effect sorghum growth. No allelopathic response from common milkweed on sorghum was

shown using a stairstep apparatus which eliminated direct competition between the two plants.

*Additional index words.* Allelopathy, *Asclepias syriaca*, competition, interference, sorghum, yield reduction.

## INTRODUCTION

Common milkweed occurs in many cropland and noncropland areas of northeastern North America (1,4). This perennial broadleaf is a common weed problem in eastern and south central Nebraska. In Nebraska it is estimated that 5 million acres of land is infested with common milkweed (5).

Common milkweed is adapted to a wide range of climatic and edaphic conditions. It will tolerate salt concentrations up to 2500 ppmw and pH ranging from 2 to 12 (2). Infestations may be found on soils of any textural group, but they are most prevalent on soils of loamy texture that are well-drained (6). The major concern with common milkweed infestations is the reduction in crop yields which occur. Nebraska research (3) shows that common milkweed infestations reduced grain sorghum yields as much as 21% and yield loss increased with severity of infestation. Losses of grain sorghum yield shown were attributed entirely to competition. However, others have indicated that noncompetitive (allelopathic) mechanisms may play a role in yield reductions (7,8). It has been shown that aqueous extracts from field collected common milkweed

leaves will inhibit growth of grain sorghum seedlings (7). Using a stairstep pot experiment, it was shown that leachate from both living and dead common milkweed plants caused a reduction in sorghum growth (8).

Objectives of these experiments were to determine the distribution of common milkweed in eastern and south central Nebraska, study its biology, and evaluate possible allelopathic influence on grain sorghum.

#### MATERIALS AND METHODS

Roadside survey. Distribution and severity of infestations of common milkweed in eastern Nebraska were based on visual estimates of common milkweed infestations taken in June 1976 through 1979. The survey was subdivided to cover three areas, each beginning and ending in Lincoln, Nebraska. The three oblong routes were northeast to South Sioux City, south central to Alma, and southeast to Nebraska City and Beatrice which totaled about 1200 km. At 1.6 km intervals severity of common milkweed infestations were estimated in the field and roadside ditch on either side of the road by visual observation as the vehicle was slowed to 32 km/h. Severity of infestations were rated as 0, 0 to 10, 10 to 100, and 100 to 1000 plants per 0.4 ha over the entire field.

Competitive experiments. Common milkweed grows in clumps which facilitates the use of a paired plot method for determining the competitive effects of infestations on

crops. Effect of common milkweed infestations on plant population, grain yield, and protein content of corn, sorghum, and soybeans were determined during 1976 through 1979. Grain samples were harvested from a 7.6 m. length of row within the common milkweed infestation and at least 3 m outside the infestation in the same crop row. Common milkweed plants were counted between rows each 7.6 m long, and crop plants were counted within the 7.6 m row plots. Grain samples were dried at 80 C for 1 week and weighed. A portion of each sample was ground to pass through a 2 mm screen to be analyzed for protein content (Kjeldahl method). Data are expressed as percentage reduction in common milkweed infested areas as compared with noninfested areas.

Conductivity and pH. Experiments were conducted in the laboratory to determine the effect of growing media conductivity and pH on germination percentage, radicle length, and hypocotyl or coleoptile length of common milkweed and sorghum seeds. Conductivity treatments were prepared by adjusting the conductivity of distilled water with potassium chloride. Resulting conductivities were 0.02 (distilled water), 0.5, 1, 2, 3, 7, 13, and 25 mmhos/cm<sup>2</sup>. Distilled water was modified with hydrochloric acid or sodium hydroxide to obtain pH values of 2, 4, 6, 8, and 10. Ten common milkweed or sorghum seeds on filter paper in 9 cm petri dishes received 5 ml of the various conductivity or pH solutions as a germination solution.

Treatments were replicated 5 times. Petri dishes were then placed in a laboratory germinator operated at an alternating 20 C for 16 h of darkness and 30 C for 8 h of light. Germination percentage, radicle length, and hypocotyl or coleoptile length were recorded after 7 days.

Repeated leaching. To establish the effects of repeated leaching on solution conductivity and pH, 8 L of a half-strength modified Hoagland's solution was leached through washed sand or Sharpsburg silty clay loam (Typic Argindoll):washed sand mixture (50:50) for 7 consecutive days. At the end of each leaching, conductivity and pH measurements were recorded. Samples of each days leachate were saved for germination experiments and the leachate was brought back up to the original 8 L volume with fresh half-strength modified Hoagland's solution. Germination experiments with the leachate samples were conducted as previously described.

Aqueous extracts. To determine if common milkweed contains compounds toxic to the growth of other plants, aqueous extracts of field collected common milkweed shoots and 6-week-old greenhouse-grown seedlings were used as the growth media for common milkweed and sorghum seeds. Extracts were made by homogenizing 12.5 g of common milkweed shoots or roots in 125 ml of distilled water for 5 min in a Polytron homogenizer. The mixture was then filtered with a Buchner funnel till dry.

Ten seeds of common milkweed or sorghum placed on a