

# Asclepias physocarpa

## Balloon plant

*Asclepias physocarpa* (E. Mey.) Schlechter  
Syn. *Gomphocarpus physocarpus*

Family: Asclepiadaceae

**Description:** Pasture weed. Branched, semiwoody shrub to 6 ft tall. Milky sap. Leaves opposite, narrow, 5 inches long by 0.8 inches wide. Flowers white in hanging clusters (cymes) at the axils. Fruit an inflated “balloon” (follicle) that splits at maturity to release white thistles. Originally introduced as a fiber crop. Since ancient times, members of this family (milkweed family) had medicinal uses for a wide variety of ailments. Native American tribes used various parts of the plant in cooking. However, probably all *Asclepias* species have poisonous principles. Livestock avoid the milkweeds unless severely starving<sup>(43)</sup>. First collected on O‘ahu in 1919. Genus named for *Aesculapius*, the Greek god of medicine; *physocarpa* refers to the inflated fruit<sup>(5, 70)</sup>.

**Distribution:** From southern Africa. Common in low-elevation dry areas of all islands except Ni‘ihau<sup>(70)</sup>. Reported recently on Moloka‘i (Glenn Teves, Univ. Hawai‘i).

**Environmental impact:** Poisonous. Seeds readily spread by wind. Infestations soared in Ka‘ū when kikuyugrass pastures were damaged by the yellow sugarcane aphid (*Sipha* spp.) to the point that cattle were



not visible in the balloon plant infestations. Seems to ebb in some years, e.g., 1999. Research needed on ecology of this weed.

**Management:** Mature plants tolerant of herbicides. Higher, unstated rates of metsulfuron reported effective (A. Teshima, DuPont). May require crop oil carrier with ester formulation dicot killer. Goats will control balloon plant (An Peischel).