As the days grow shorter and the flowers of summer are winding down, others are coming into their own, glowing with the fire of early fall color. One of the true glories of the autumn landscape is *Solidago*, our native goldenrod, its lavish displays of yellow and gold spires a common sight along roadsides, in open woodlands, meadows, pine barrens and marshy thickets. Long a popular plant in European fields and gardens, goldenrod’s popularity for naturalizing gardens and landscapes is on the rise in this country.

The genus gets its name from the Latin *solidus*, meaning “whole.” Goldenrods have a long history of external and internal medicinal uses by American natives and European physicians dating back to the Crusades. Of the more than 100 species, only one goldenrod is native to Europe and Asia, and a few are found in South America. The remaining species are found in North America – 30 within the Great Smokies of North Carolina and Tennessee alone.

Typical of the *Asteraceae* family to which they belong, goldenrods are composites. Each little yellow tuft is a densely packed flower head rich in pollen and nectar. Its flower clusters can be plumed, wand-like, axillary or flat-topped. Colors range from a yellow-green as the flower buds, into a rich yellow, and finally bronze at the end of its bloom cycle. Plants can range anywhere from 1-1/2 feet to six feet tall, but four feet is more typical. Leaves can be toothed or smooth-margined, and are most often narrow and lance-shaped.

**Pesky Weed or Garden Treasure?**

Until recently, goldenrod, which grows in woods, swamps, overgrown fields, salt marshes and even on sand dunes, was generally thought of as a weed. Sadly, most plants that grow abundantly in the wild are often relegated to the weed category. Perhaps Ralph Waldo Emerson came closer to the truth when he wrote that a weed is a plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered. The truth is, many of the “roadside” natives that we unjustly malign as weeds are underestimated when it comes to their aesthetic and ecological value in the natural landscape.

In many areas, goldenrod is one of the last plants to flower before frost, and its abundance of pollen acts as a magnet, drawing many different kinds of pollinating insects. Compared to other flowers, goldenrod is not a big nectar producer, but the sheer number of flowers per plant—over 1,000 on average—counterbalances the low rate of nectar secretion per flower. Its pollen is heavy and sticky so it will cling to its insect visitors for a ride to the next plant, where pollination occurs.
Attracting Beneficial Insects

Native bees rely heavily on this late season bloomer to give them the energy they will need to make it through the long winter. Bumblebee colonies, in particular, store little honey; if they can’t get a steady supply of nectar, they die out. Goldenrod is often the last flower visited by nectar-sipping butterflies before they migrate. Once the flowers are gone, the plants are adorned with seed heads that last well into winter, providing a valuable food source for birds, like chickadees, finches and pine siskins.

Pollen-rich flowers like goldenrod play a significant role in maintaining nature’s system of checks and balances. In addition to their role in pollination, the insects visiting the flowers of the goldenrods act as natural biological controls, helping combat garden pests like slugs, snails and aphids without recourse to chemicals. Regular visitors include pirate bugs, solider beetles, and hoverflies – these are bugs you want in your garden! The larvae of hoverflies feed on aphids; one larva can eat 400 aphids during its short lifetime. Soldier beetles feed on grasshopper eggs as well as the larvae of corn rootworms and cucumber beetles. Pirate bugs feed on thrips, spider mites, and leafhopper nymphs, and are adept at finding harmful insects hidden deep within the goldenrod’s flowers.

What some scorn as a pesky weed can be a garden treasure. The delicate fronds of goldenrod can even look attractive in the winter garden.
Growing Goldenrods

While sunny meadows and former prairie lands carry the majority of the wild species, other goldenrods are quite at home in the partial shade of the woods. *Solidago flexicaulis* (the zig-zag or broad-leaved goldenrod), *S. ulmifolia* (the elm-leaved goldenrod), and *S. caesia* (the blue-stemmed or wreath goldenrod) do well in partially shaded or filtered light. There are goldenrods of bog and fen environments (*S. uliginosa*, *S. ohioensis*, *S. patula*, and *S. tenufolia*), as well as goldenrods originating in salty seaside areas (*S. sempervirens*).

Native plants are well adapted to their region. With built-in resilience to temperature and rainfall fluctuations, when planted in the proper situation, they require minimal maintenance. Hardy to Zone 3, goldenrods are drought-resistant and require no fertilizers or herbicides. Although they tolerate a wide variety of soil fertility and soil textures, most species thrive in full sun to very light shade in well-drained soil.

Goldenrods can be propagated by division or by seed. Like other “prairie” plants, the seeds need to be stratified (cold treated) for germination to occur in the spring. Fall sowing allows the changing of the seasons to break the dormancy naturally; if planting in the spring, buy stratified seeds to increase germination chances.

Most wild species propagate by a spreading root system, which can be troublesome in smaller landscaping areas. To avoid crowding out other flowers, plant goldenrods as a border where they have some roaming space. Make the border narrow or leave a path through it for easy picking of flowers and weeding. For smaller spaces, the less greedy, clump-forming goldenrods are preferable to the rhizomatous varieties.

Stiff goldenrod, *S. rigida*, is a clump forming goldenrod with rounded gray-green leaves. Its flowers are not as showy as some of the others, but the leaves add contrast to the garden. Under ideal conditions, *S. rigida* can grow to a height of five feet, but cutting it back by one half during the growth season reduces the overall height and makes for more compact growth. Have patience; prairie plants in general spend their first year or two making roots. Your plot or border will not come into its full glory until the third year.

If planting a larger area, mow the new patch when it is about three to four inches high with the blade set high enough to cut the flower heads off the weeds to prevent their reseeding while not harming the young goldenrod plants. If you recognize the weeds, you can also control them by hand weeding. In rural areas, burning the patch in early spring is a great way to control weeds. All prairie plants were grown in a grassland environment and had to survive natural brush fires every few years. Fire was actually a beneficial agent; the flames returned nutrients to the soil and removed the litter. In the modern environment, burning is even more valuable because it helps control exotic, non-native weeds, like wild onions and dandelions, which tend to appear earlier in the spring than the prairie plants.

Some goldenrods are susceptible to powdery mildew, identified by gray patches on the leaves. Full sun, good drainage and ample air circulation (dividing or thinning out clumps increases air flow) reduces the likelihood of disease. The same techniques work to inhibit rust, which appears as bronze spots ma
on stems and the undersides of leaves. Goldenrod gall, a smooth spindle-shaped swelling on the plant’s stem caused by a tiny insect parasite, is harmless. In their search for winter food, downy woodpeckers will chisel their way into the gall and make short work of the insect larvae inside.

Making a Comeback

Goldenrod was a common element of author Willa Cather’s “sea of wind-blown grasses” – the huge tallgrass prairies that covered much of the American plains in pioneer days. Recently, these native prairie perennials are enjoying a long-overdue comeback. A growing awareness of the value of native plants has been translated into urban gardens, bright with goldenrod and its companion plants in the wild – blazing star (Liatris spicata), coreopsis (Coreopsis sp.), purple coneflower (Echinacea purpurea), butterfly weed (Asclepias tuberosa), Indian blanket (Gaillardia aristata) and black-eyed Susan (Rudbeckia sp.). The yellow hues of goldenrod mixed with the varied bronzes, russets, oranges and purples of the fall prairie are a stunning sight to behold.

Be forewarned that many of the goldenrods, being highly specific to the conditions of their native site, are not good performers out of their element. Consult a field guide or your local nursery can advise which varieties are best suited for your climate and growing conditions. But no matter which variety you choose, the profusion of tightly clustered yellow flowers of this wildflower will do double-duty in the garden – adding a splash of vibrant fall color while extending a fragrant invitation to pollinators and other beneficial insects.

Oh, and don’t worry about allergies. Seasonal sneezing is not caused by the insect-pollinated goldenrod, but by the wind-pollinated ragweed, which blooms at the same time!

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Goldenrod Resources

Seed Sources:
Prairie Nursery, Inc.
P. O. Box 306, Westfield WI, 53964
(800) 476-9453, www.prairienursery.com

Bowman’s Hill Wildflower Preserve
P.O. Box 865, New Hope PA 18938-0685
(215) 862-2924, www.bhwp.org

Native American Seed
127 No. 16th Street, Junction TX 76849
(800) 728-4043, www.seedsource.com

Prairie Restorations, Inc.
PO Box 327, Princeton MN 55371
(763) 389-4342, www.prairieresto.com

Wildflower Farm
RR 3, Schomberg ON L0G 1T0
(866) 476-9453, www.wildflowerfarm.com

Richters Herbs
Goodwood, ON L0C 1A0
(905) 640-6677, www.richters.com

Books:


Natural Landscapes by John Brookes (DK Publishing, 1988)

Earthly Delights by Rosalind Creasey (Sierra Club Books, 1985)

The Book of Swamp and Bog by John Eastman (Stackpole Books, 1995)

Grow Wild! Native Plant Gardening in Canada by Lorraine Johnson (Random House, 1998)

Perennials for Every Purpose by Larry Hodgson (Rodale, 2000)

The Beginning Naturalist by Gail Lawrence and Adelaide Murphy (New England Press, 1980)

Planting the Seed: A Guide to Establishing Prairie and Meadow Plants (Environment Canada, 1998)

Good Bug, Bad Bug: Your Take-Along Insect Identification Guide (Rodale, 1999)

Endangered Species Caution

While goldenrod may appear to be ubiquitous in the wild, and can even become invasive, some species of goldenrod are endangered. For instance, the Showy Goldenrod (Solidago spectosa) is protected under Canada’s Species at Risk Act (SARA). It also occurs sparsely throughout much of the eastern United States and on the central Great Plains. In Canada, Showy Goldenrod is restricted to southwestern Ontario. Likewise, the Short’s goldenrod (Solidago shortii) has been designated as endangered pursuant to the Endangered Species Act in the U.S. So unless you are sure that a particular species found in the wild is not endangered, buy seeds from a reputable supplier rather than digging up the plant for transplanting.

For more about the medicinal qualities of goldenrod, see an article published in Natural Life magazine in 1996. Find it at www.life.ca/nl/51/golden.html.

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