

THE PIONEERS - BLACK-EYED SUSAN, GAILLARDIA & CONEFLOWER

By Shirley Froehlich, BSA

To me, Black-Eyed Susans always seem like happy plants. They lift the spirits with their bright yellow petals and dark eyes. They represent sunshine and happiness. Gaillardias attract the attention of many people with their big yellow flowers and strawberry red centres. Someone once told me that her grandmother called this plant “Jam in the Middle”. It is sometimes called “Indian Blanket”. The trademark of Prairie Coneflower is the unusual looking yellow flowers. The cylindrical head is surrounded by showy yellow petals pointing straight down.

These three plants have several things in common. Their bright yellow flowers make them some of our showiest prairie wildflowers. They make great cut flowers for bouquets in midsummer. They are members of the Compositae or Sunflower family with a central head composed of many tubular florets surrounded by ray florets with showy, strap-like petals. Also, they are all pioneer plants, being among the first to colonize disturbed areas. These pioneer plants are fast growing and will bloom the first season, however, they are short lived compared to other prairie plants with a life span of 2-4 years. They all have the ability to reseed themselves and start new plants easily on bare soil. If you want new plants to replace the parent plants, do not disturb the area and have patience. The seed which fell to the ground in fall will start to germinate in mid May and new seedlings should be noticeable around mid June. If the spring is dry you will get better germination with regular watering of the area. These new seedlings stay small the first year because they are putting down roots. You will get full size plants with lots of flowers the 2nd year. I seeded some Black-Eyed Susans one year in late October and the following spring was very dry until mid June, resulting in little germination. However, after 3 weeks of wet weather a nice crop of seedlings appeared in July. So don't give up too quickly.

DESCRIPTION

Black-Eyed Susan *Rudbeckia hirta* is a biennial that grows 30-60 cm tall (12”-24”). The stems and leaves are quite hairy, even in the seedling stage. The flowers, which bloom throughout July, actually have dark brown centres rather than black. This is one of the “Top Ten” nectar plants for butterflies.

Gaillardia *Gaillardia aristata* lives 3-4 years and grows 30-80 cm tall (12”-30”). The leaves are greyish green and hairy. The lower leaves are stalked and spatulate and the upper ones are stalkless, smaller and often slightly lobed. Flowers appear throughout July and are variable. On some the petals are all yellow with a red centre. On others the inner 1/3 to 2/3 of the petals is red with yellow on the outer edges.

Prairie Coneflower *Ratibida columnifera* lives 3-4 years and is a bushy 30-60 cm plant (12”-24”). It is more fine textured in appearance because the leaves are very deeply divided into narrow segments. Very occasionally the yellow petals are rusty brown. It blooms up to six weeks throughout July until mid August. Birds like to eat the seed.

NATIVE HABITAT

Gaillardia and Coneflower prefer well drained soil and dry conditions, therefore, they are not commonly found in the Red River Valley. Bird's Hill Park is an exception to this because of its sandy soil. They are both found in the park. They grow in open prairies and ditches of western Manitoba as well as Saskatchewan and Alberta. Their range extends quite far south to the drier western states of the U.S. I saw both of them on a poster of Wildflowers of New Mexico, although in New Mexico they are called Indian Firewheel (Gaillardia) and Mexican Hat (Coneflower).

Black-Eyed Susan grows near the edges of aspen bluffs and in open prairie where the moisture is good, in all three prairie provinces. Its range also extends east to Quebec and throughout the U.S. particularly east of the Rockies.

CULTURE

All these plants require full sun. Coneflower and Gaillardia prefer dry to medium, well drained soil. Black-Eyed Susan does best in medium to moist soil. They can be planted in groups in flower beds or mixed with other wildflowers and native grasses for a prairie meadow.

Plants can be set out in the garden after the danger of frost is past in spring. If you wish to grow your own plants, seed in mid March for planting outside in late May or early June. Do not cover the seed with media as they require light to germinate. They all germinate in 5-7 days. You also get good results by direct seedling them outdoors in mid to late October.

These pioneer plants are very popular with gardeners for their fast growth and showy blooms. Their bright yellow flowers add a splash of colour to the garden. They also attract birds and butterflies to your garden for nectar and seed.

Shirley is the owner of Prairie Originals, a nursery specialising in wildflowers and native prairie grasses near Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. www.prairieoriginals.com