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The Benefits of Goldenrod

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(MGV class of 2007)

In some circles, goldenrod (*Solidago spp.*) is despised. I used to be in one of those circles. As steamy August days got shorter and summer flowers dropped their bright skirts and bowed their heads, goldenrod blazed forth in golden splendor. And I began to sneeze. My mother told me it was those nasty yellow flowers all over the fields and roadsides.

It wasn't. The surreptitious culprit, waving a nondescript green flower head loaded with pollen dust, was ragweed (*Ambrosia spp.)*. They bloom at the same time.

A single ragweed plant can produce a billion grains of pollen and that pollen can remain airborne for several days. Ragweed has no need to be showy or beautiful; it has no interest in birds, bees or butterflies, just the wind. All these years, it has inconspicuously caused histamine reactions in humans and let goldenrod take the rap.

Photo: *Ragweed in flower*

Flamboyant goldenrod. For centuries, known for its healing properties and used for dyes. Prolific producer of nectar and pollen from late summer into fall, it is an important flowering plant for native bees, and actually crucial to the winter survival of some honeybees. The pollen, which is sticky and carried by insects, NOT wind, adds considerable amounts of protein, fats and minerals to the late-season diet of the bees. Goldenrod also produces many seeds and so has earned a beloved spot in the diet of goldfinches, grosbeaks and nuthatches.

Other birds, especially chickadees and downy woodpeckers, like the energy-rich larvae hidden in goldenrod galls. Goldenrods are host to about fifty species of gall-making insects, from moths to

flies to midges. Goldenrod bunch galls, also called rosette galls, are the result of an egg being laid in the topmost leaf bud of Canada goldenrod (*Solidago canadensis*) by a midge (*Rhopalomyia solidaginis)*. The stem stops growing, but the leaves don't. The resulting rosette of leaves provides shelter and food for the midge larva, and well as many other insects, including other midges. Another gall-making insect, the Goldenrod gall fly (*Eurosta solidagninis*) parasitizes not the leaf buds but the stems of goldenrod plants causing them to produce large spherical galls. The larva overwinters in the gall and emerges in the spring if it doesn't get eaten first—either by the birds or by wasps that live in the same gall.

Goldenrod also attracts butterflies. The native Canada goldenrod is a food source for monarch, clouded sulfur, American small copper, and gray hairstreak.

Goldenrod flowers grow as an inflorescence in a broad or sometimes narrow pyramidal panicle. The stems can be anywhere from 2 to 5 feet tall. There are several to many horizontal branches, which carry numerous, densely-crowded small heads of golden yellow flowers.

Time for full disclosure. You should know the other reason they are sometimes despised: some, and especially the ubiquitous Canada goldenrod, have not been known to behave nicely with other plants. Clonal in nature, Canada goldenrod reproduces by rhizomes as well as by seed, and can be quite aggressive in taking ground. Left unchecked, they have been known to take over even raspberry patches.

In their defense, if you want a wild native plant garden, rhizomes could be checked by using underground barriers, or you could pull or dig the ones you don't want. The golden flowers look especially great with purple asters, Joe Pye (*Eupatorium*), and New York Ironweed (*Vernonia*).

Goldenrod for Gardens

Otherwise, you could opt for other-than-wild. There are about 140 varieties of goldenrod today, and many of the more recent varieties are, you might say, well bred. They are much better behaved than their wild cousins and quite lovely in perennial gardens. Most are hardy from USDA zones 4 to 7. The plants will survive just about anywhere, though most prefer full sun. Goldenrods also tolerate a variety of soil types. Although many insects love them, including the gall insects, ambush bugs, butterflies and bees, they are relatively pest free (well, their insects tend to like just goldenrod) and drought tolerant. Clumps can be rejuvenated by division in spring every 4 to 6 years.

Fireworks goldenrod *(S. rugosa* 'Fireworks') and Showy goldenrod (*S. speciose*) are popular. Grey goldenrod (*S. nemoralis*) does well in sandy soil but needs to be re-sown every few years. Swamp goldenrod (*S. uliginosa*) actually performs well in areas with wet soil, and if you need a salt-tolerant goldenrod, there is Seaside (*S. sempervirens*), whose height varies from 1 to 8 feet depending on its growing conditions. Stiff goldenrod (*S. rigida*), which is 3-5 feet tall and clump forming, might do best with tall plants at the back of the border. White goldenrod (*S. bicolor*), also called silverrod, likes sandy soil and is the only member of the genus in the East that doesn't have bright yellow flowers. Its tiny white flowers are clustered in the axis of the leaves.

Photo: *S. rugosa*

Photo: *S. bicolor*

All varieties of goldenrod make beautiful cut flowers, especially now that you know you could not possibly be allergic to them. They add pizazz and attract birds, bees and butterflies to your fall landscape.

The right goldenrod in your landscape might be worth its weight in, oh, gold. If your garden needs new eye-pop for autumn, may I suggest a brilliant goldenrod paired with purple?

References

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