

2008- The Year of Rudbeckia

Each year the National Garden Bureau showcases one flower and one vegetable that are widely adaptable, genetically diverse, and versatile. Rudbeckia is the featured flower for 2008 and an all-American treasure. This native wildflower can be found in fields and along roadsides throughout the country.

Rudbeckias, also known as coneflowers, black-eyed Susans, gloriosa daisies or rudbeckia, comprise a genus made up of 25 species including perennials, biennials and annuals. All are native to North America and are generally found growing in the East and Midwest, though they have now naturalized throughout most of the United States and can be seen in fields and gardens from Canada to Mexico.

A member of the Aster family, the rudbeckia's daisy-like flowers come in single, semi-double and fully-double forms in a range of colors from lemon-yellow to gold, chestnut, mahogany, and bronze, as well as multicolored blooms. Most species are in bloom from midsummer through fall. Plants have coarse-textured, hairy green leaves.

Clasping coneflower (*Rudbeckia amplexicaulis*) is native to the southeastern United States but has naturalized throughout the country. This hardy annual has heart-shaped leaves that clasp the stem and bright yellow petals with reddish-purple markings that droop beneath the long, black, conical seed head. It reseeds freely and can form dense colonies in moist areas.

Native to the eastern and midwestern prairies, the brown-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia triloba*) is covered with a surplus of dainty, 1- to 2-inch yellow flowers with button-like black centers that fade to brown. Often called the three-lobed coneflower, this biennial or short-lived perennial is hardy in zones 4-7 but can also be grown as an annual. Plants are 2- to 5-feet tall depending on the growing conditions.

Despite its name, the petals of the orange coneflower (*Rudbeckia fulgida*) are not true orange but a warm yellow. A popular choice is *Rudbeckia fulgida* var. *sullivantii* 'Goldsturm' which translated means Golden Storm, no doubt referring to its masses of flowers with pale gold petals. This award-winning perennial variety has proven to be a workhorse in the garden. The 2- to 3-foot tall plants are long-lived and reliably produce an abundance of blooms from midsummer through September. 'Goldsturm' can be grown from seed or purchased as a container-grown plant. It is considered hardy in zones 3-9.

The largest group of rudbeckias for the garden is *Rudbeckia hirta* . Often called gloriosa daisy, this short-lived perennial and is usually grown as an annual in Northern areas. Flowers bloom from July until frost in shades of orange, orange-yellow and yellow.

'Indian Summer' is an All-America Selections (AAS) winner from 1995. It produces stunning 5- to 9-inch flowers on plants that reach about 3-feet tall. The golden-yellow flowers are ideal for cutting. Another AAS winner is 'Cherokee Sunset' (*Rudbeckia x hirta hybrida*). The semi-double and double, 2- to 4-inch, flowers bloom in shades of yellow, orange, bronze, and mahogany. Plants reach about 30-inches tall.

Looking for something different? The 2003 AAS winner 'Prairie Sun' produces spectacular 5-inch blooms with golden-yellow petals tipped with a brush of lighter primrose yellow surrounding a striking, light-green center cone. The 3-foot tall branching plants can be grown in gardens and large containers. A similar variety with smaller yellow flowers and green centers is 'Irish Eyes' or 'Green Eyes.' They look spectacular in the garden and in bouquets.

One of the most unusual rudbeckias is the perennial *Rudbeckia occidentalis* 'Green Wizard.' These large, 3- to 5-inch flowers don't have the typical colorful petals, only a ring of green sepals surrounding an elongated black cone center. They are striking in the garden and add unique beauty to arrangements, fresh or dried.

Next week- Growing Rudbeckia in the Home Garden

Source: National Garden Bureau, www.ngb.org .