Black-eyed Susan

Rudbeckia hirta

By Barbara Nuffer

Black-eyed Susan is a favorite summer-blooming native wildflower that flourishes in New York State's fields and meadows. It can be found growing in all areas of the United States, except the Southwest.

There are approximately 25 native North American *Rudbeckia* species, with eight species native to the Northeast. *Rudbeckia hirta* was originally native to the dry prairies of the Midwest. Settlers' removal of the forest overstory allowed the plant to move eastward. Several features contribute to the drought-tolerant nature of this plant, including a root system adapted to maximize water absorption, and hairy leaves and stems designed to minimize water loss. The specific name, *hirta*, means hairy in Latin. The generic name is in honor of Swedish botanist Olaus Rudbeck (1660-1740).

Flowers of Black-eyed Susan are composite, and are actually made up of small outer "ray" florets and central "disk" florets. A Black-eyed Susan flower head has a ring of approximately ten to fourteen sterile ray florets surrounding a central disk. Each ray floret has one yellow petal. The center of the Black-eyed Susan has hundreds of fertile dark brown disk florets that each produce a seed.

A biennial, the plant develops a rosette of leaves in its first year and blooms with a tall flowering stem in the second year. Most plants will live for only two years; on occasion a plant may live an additional year or two.

Many insects feed on the nectar and yellow pollen of this plant, including several different species of bees, flies, and butterflies. Caterpillars eat the leaves and finches enjoy the seeds. Interestingly, the ultraviolet range of a bee's vision shows the yellow petals as three concentric rings surrounding the brown center. This pattern serves to lead bees to the pollen and nectar in the central disk florets.

Native Americans employed this plant in a variety of ways: a tea made from the root was used to treat colds and parasitic worms in children; drops were made from the root to treat earaches; the plant was used as a skin wash for sores and snake bites; and yellow pigment from the flowers dyed rushes, which were later woven into mats.

Gloriosa daisy, a favorite of flower gardeners, is a tall cultivar of *Rudbeckia hirta*. The flowers of the variety Indian Summer range in color from yellow to mahogany. Although the original plants will last only a season or two, they will self-seed readily.

You can also enjoy Black-eyed Susans in your garden with a close relative, *Rudbeckia fulgida* Goldsturm. It was named the 1999 "Perennial Plant of the Year." If you remove the spent flowers, it will bloom continuously from July through October. Goldsturm is a long-lived perennial that forms a large clump and is easily divided in spring.

In the garden and in the meadow, Black-eyed Susans provide bright golden-yellow flowers throughout late summer and into the fall. This widespread wildflower adds a contrasting layer of beauty to the hues of New York's colorful autumn landscape.

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