

Notable Natives

Goldenrod

Is there a more maligned plant than goldenrod? It's blamed for causing hay fever when the culprit is really ragweed. (Insect-pollinated goldenrod has heavy, sticky pollen that adheres to bees and butterflies while ragweed pollen is wind-borne and flies through the air to bedevil your nostrils.) Goldenrod is sneeringly derided as a mere roadside weed — which is occasionally true. However, gardeners, home owners, lovers of flowers and bees and butterflies and all things environmentally healthy, take note. Many of our native goldenrods *Solidago*, *sp.* are for you!

Two species give goldenrod its bad name; they are tall and Canada goldenrod *Solidago altissima* and *S. canadensis*. When you see massed fields of tall, spindly goldenrod or you



Stiff goldenrod at Flint Creek Savanna. Photo by Diane Bodkin.

see it along the road, one of these two species is the culprit. These are very fine plants as part of a mature prairie or a high-quality restoration. They offer the same ecosystem services as the other goldenrods, providing pollen and nectar for pollinators and habitat for other insects, birds, and small creatures. The galls on goldenrod stems are evidence that goldenrod gall fly larvae are making a home inside. Chickadees and downy woodpeckers open the galls and eat the larvae.

These plant species become problematic in backyards and prairie gardens because there is little competition either above or below ground to keep them in check. Such rhizomatous species often become invasive. They spread rampantly when outside their proper ecosystems. Don't let these two species get started in your yard, or you will regret it! Now think about all the wonderful goldenrod species you **can** plant and enjoy.

Everyone recognizes goldenrod. All species have profuse, yellow flowers on mostly erect stems. They fill many habitats: sun and shade, wet and dry. There is a species of goldenrod to inhabit any spot in your garden plan, and it will be easy to establish and well-behaved. All are in the Aster family (Asteraceae) and bloom in late summer to mid-fall. All serve the pollinators and other native creatures. One just needs to choose the proper species for his specific location. Here are a few beautiful goldenrods that are indigenous in our area.

One of my favorites is showy goldenrod *Solidago speciosa*. This is a savanna plant that is sometimes found on prairies. It will thrive in light shade and in full sun. It does well on drier sites and, like most natives, won't need watering once it is established. Its tiny bright yellow flowers are arranged in



Bumblebees on showy goldenrod. Photo by Meredith Tucker.

dense club-shaped clusters at the top of reddish stems. Although it does have rhizomes, it never seems to become aggressive.

Showy goldenrod is an absolute bumblebee magnet with up to sixteen bees on a single inflorescence (a cluster of flowers). I have also seen it attract an amazing number of monarch butterflies at one time. Blooming at about the same time as New England aster in the fall, the yellow and purple flowers create a stunning display while they provide vital nutrients for migrating butterflies and for bees foraging for their over-wintering queens. This is not an invasive species of goldenrod; it seems to stay where it is planted and is quite long-lived. Try it; you'll like it!

Another of my favorite goldenrods is blue-stemmed goldenrod *S. caesia*. It grows in the shade and blooms in late summer to autumn. In natural settings, it grows in black oak savannas and rich woods and is associated with sugar maple and American linden, but it grows and blooms beautifully under my chinquapin and bur oaks. It reaches up to three feet tall in clumps and does not spread aggressively. It has arching greenish-blue stems and tiny bright yellow flowers in loose clusters along the stems. It is distinctive and easy to identify.

Another nice species that likes some shade is **elm-leaved goldenrod** *S. ulmifolia*. It is frequent in oak woods, but mine has taken over some areas of prairie garden in full sun. I find it to be more aggressive than blue-stemmed but nothing like the aggressive tall and Canada goldenrods. Elm-leaved grows to three feet tall on erect stems. Like the other species, it is beloved of bees and other pollinators.

Solidago rigida, **stiff goldenrod**, thrives in average well-drained soil. Its appearance is unique with tiny, bright yellow flowers borne in dense, erect, flat-topped clusters. It may grow from three to five feet tall. I've read that it can be weedy because it has rhizomes, but I've never encountered a problem with it in my yard.

Finally, *S. ohioensis* is a lovely goldenrod for wet areas. It grows from three to four feet tall and has the largest of the goldenrod flowers, putting on an exuberant late season display. It will grow in moist clay as well as good garden soil. **Ohio**



Close-up of flowers on showy goldenrod. Photo by Meredith Tucker.

goldenrod is a reasonably conservative plant and another associate of New England aster—a wonderful combination!

If this article has peaked your interest, try purchasing a few plants at our Annual Native Plant Sale in May. Check our website for the order form. You won't be sorry when you see the gorgeous yellow blooms and the wonderful pollinators that cover them.

— Meredith Tucker

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