

Rudbeckia hirta (Black-eyed Susan)

Botanical Bytes by Bruner

By Gregory Bruner

Foliage Height: 18-36”
Foliage Width: 18-36”
Flower Height: 18-36”
Foliage Color: Green
Flower Color: Yellow
USDA Hardiness: 3-9
Moisture: Average
Light: Full Sun – Part Sun



Rudbeckia hirta is possibly the most easily recognized wildflower in the United States. It is found in almost every one of the lower 48 states. Originally this beauty was found growing happily in prairies, dry fields, and open wooded areas, although now it is mostly sighted along road shoulders and disturbed areas as urban expansion chews up its natural territory. It has a number of regional names depending on where you travel in the United States—Black-eyed Susan, Brown Betty, Gloriosa Daisy, Golden Jerusalem, and Poorland Daisy to name a few.

There has been discussion as to whether *Rudbeckia hirta* is a biennial or short-lived perennial. The simple fact is this wonderful flower is so prolific through re-seeding that this is generally a non-issue. It reseeds readily and often blooms the first year!

Gardeners should deadhead old blooms to prolong bloom time, which usually lasts 4-6 weeks between midsummer and early fall. If you enjoy bird watching, leave the seed heads for the birds to feast on later in the season. The stems hold up well when cut, and the bright yellow flowers will last 6-10 days when placed in water.

The flowers appeal to a wide range of fauna including bees, wasps, flies, beetles, and butterflies. Because the birds enjoy the seed heads during the winter, I usually let those alone later in the season. Our neighborhood deer generally do not bother this plant. They do not like the coarse textured leaves.

Rudbeckia hirta is more than just a pretty face. There are all sorts of interesting uses for this pretty flower. The Potawatomi Indians boiled the yellow flower petals to create a yellow dye. Extracts from various parts of the plant have been used in the creation of teas, infusions, and ointments that are used to treat a wide variety of medical needs ranging from the common cold and earaches to snakebites. Studies have been conducted that indicate extracts made from the roots could be beneficial to stimulating the immune system, possibly better than well-known echinacea.

The long history of the Black-eyed Susan is interesting and colorful. The genus's name honors Olaus Rudbeck, who was a professor of botany at the University of Uppsala in Sweden. Maryland adopted it as its state flower in 1918. The flower's colors, black and gold, were used by the first Lord of Baltimore in his coat of arms. The Preakness Stakes horse race held in Baltimore, Maryland, is also known as "The run for the Black-eyed Susans".

The Black-eyed Susan has been a leafy family member in our gardens for hundreds of years. Its well known and deserved reputation as a stalwart, easy-to-grow flower precedes it, whether it's in our backyards or along a back country road. The Black-eyed Susan is a winner for any sunny flower garden.