

# Zizia aurea (Golden alexander)

Botanical Bytes  
By Gregory Bruner

Foliage Height: 1'-2'  
Foliage Width: 1'-2'  
Flower Height: 2'-3'  
Foliage Color: Green  
Flower Color: Yellow  
USDA Hardiness: 4-9  
Moisture: Average - Wet  
Light: Part Shade - Full Sun



Zizia aurea is often a sadly ignored member of the butterfly-loving plant community. It roams over half of the United States. This little leafy beauty gets around, growing northwest into both Dakotas, northeast into Maine, southeast down to Florida, and back across to parts of Texas. It's hard to believe this butterfly larvae buffet hasn't garnered a greater following over the years.

Which butterfly you ask? I'm referring to the beautiful and majestic swallowtails. Do not be concerned about the well-being and safety of this leafy family member. I have seen plants covered with hungry leaf-gobbling swallowtail larvae and then have returned later in the season to find lush, healthy plants. Being battered by larvae does not seem to have lasting ill effects on the plant's survival. It thrives in its role as being a nursery for baby swallowtails.

The foliage may be loved by swallowtail larvae, but the flowers are also a fine nectar source for adult butterflies and many beneficial insects that visit your garden in search of a meal. This plant is loved by all sorts of crawling and winged flying critters, but what about us? Well, not only can we enjoy the flowers outside, but they also make a nice addition to cut flower arrangements. The pesky pests generally do not bother Golden Alexander, so it tends to be maintenance free.

The history behind the name of a plant is often intriguing and enlightening. The story behind Zizia aurea is a simple one. The genus Zizia was named in honor of the German botanist Johann Baptist Ziz, who lived from 1779-1829. Aurea is Latin for splendid or beautiful, which are both appropriate adjectives either describing the foliage or flowers.

I have encountered this leafy fellow while hiking many times. Golden alexander can tolerate a wide variety of growing conditions. Generally here in the Southeast, I see it growing in areas of filtered sun in open woodlands or at the edges of meadows. Sunnier locations normally are also the wetter ones. In your gardens at home, a partial sun location possessing average to moist soil would be fine. Its ability to tolerate wet soils makes it a prime pick for rain gardens or that challenging wet spot in your flower bed.

Zizia aurea was used medicinally by the Native American Meskwaki tribes to treat some common ailments. The roots were prepared to get rid of fevers, while the flower stalks were mixed into a compound that was used for headaches.

Golden alexander may be underused in our modern landscapes, but its combination of beauty and attraction for swallowtail larvae makes this plant a must for any gardener who loves butterflies.