



Goldenrod: 2008 Native Plant Sale Featured Plant

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Solidago rugosa 'Fireworks' - Photo courtesy of Mt. Cuba Center

Golden torches. Autumn blaze. Words like these are used to describe goldenrods as a beauty of the autumn field, but many American gardeners have been slow to embrace the brilliant fall display of these local natives. Goldenrods (*Solidago* sp) are finally gaining garden respect with the help of several new cultivars and more public knowledge about allergies. More than 100 species of these vigorous bloomers are found in the Northern Hemisphere, with most residing in the United States. These exceptionally hardy plants come in sizes from 2 inches to 10 feet, and cheerful hues from light yellow to deep mustard. Most bloom from late summer into autumn, providing a late-season feast for butterflies and intense color for gardeners to combine with fall hues of red and orange.

Many are convinced that the showy golden flowers are the cause of fall allergies, but goldenrods are innocent! They are insect-pollinated and have heavy, sticky pollen designed to adhere to little legs for a ride to adjacent blooms. It is the wind-pollinated plants like ragweed that produce the great quantities of light, airborne pollen that cause the real trouble. The inconspicuous flowers of these plants quietly disperse vast quantities of sneeze-inducing pollen while the showy goldenrods are busy attracting insects with their brilliant display.

At home in the border, meadow, rock, or shade garden, goldenrods play an important role in native ecosystems as soil stabilizers and sources of food and shelter for wildlife. Many species of moths and butterflies depend on these fall beauties for food, including Monarchs, which feed on them as they migrate south in the fall. Insects of all shapes and sizes can be found on goldenrod blooms, bringing birds and other bug eaters to your yard.

Goldenrods combine well with other late summer and fall bloomers, especially asters, eupatoriums and grasses. They make outstanding cut flowers and many work well in dry arrangements. If you avoid some of the aggressive species like *Solidago canadensis*, you can enjoy goldenrods in many areas of the garden.

Goldenrods are not fussy. They prefer plenty of sun and will grow in almost any soil, although they do better in good garden loam with adequate drainage. Most goldenrods are drought-resistant and need little supplemental watering once established. Be careful not to over-fertilize or irrigate your plants since too much food and water promotes rapid growth, encouraging your plants to become garden thugs. Just leave them alone and enjoy them.

For Natural Gardens

Below are a few good species for wildflower gardens or meadow plantings.

Zigzag Goldenrod

Solidago flexicaulis is an all-purpose species that doesn't get too tall or spread aggressively. It likes a little shade, but isn't picky about location and tolerates a wide variety of soils. It's wispy, brilliant yellow flowers spring from the nodes along its stem in alternate directions, earning its common name. Topping out at 3 feet, it combines beautifully with phlox, asters and shorter Joe-Pye weeds like *Eupatorium dubium*.

Early Goldenrod

Solidago juncea has bright yellow flowers that are borne in showy plume-like panicles atop 3-4' stems. As the common name suggests, this species has one of the earliest bloom periods (mid-summer) of the many goldenrods and combines well with coneflowers, phlox and Joe-Pyes.

Gray Goldenrod

Solidago nemoralis is one of the smaller goldenrods, often reaching no more than 2 feet tall. Arching stems with grayish hairs are topped with golden wands in September and October. Native to most of North America, it is one of the easiest species to grow. It is an ideal choice for difficult locations like a hot, sunny slope with rocky soils or a neglected patio container. It combines well with aromatic aster (*Aster oblongifolius*).



Blue-Stemmed Goldenrod

Solidago caesia is distinctive goldenrod that is both elegant and shade-tolerant. Arching wands of clustered golden blooms, contrast with blue-green stems in September. This goldenrod adds bright fall color to a dry shady spot and combines well with wood asters and heucheras. It also self sows in good conditions.

For the Garden Connoisseur

These choice cultivars of goldenrod are great for more formal garden plantings and containers, but they are equally at home in more natural settings.

'Fireworks' Goldenrod

Rough-stemmed goldenrod, *Solidago rugosa* 'Fireworks' is a lovely, vigorous, 3-foot plant that puts on a magnificent show in mid to late September through October. The flowers arch over in a spray, suggesting a shower of gold. It's a wonderful plant for adding height to the back of the border or to naturalize with smooth aster (*Aster laevis* 'Bluebird'), *Boltonia asteroides* 'Snowbank', or switch grass (*Panicum virgatum* 'Heavy Metal'), an ornamental grass with dramatic blue-green foliage

'Golden Fleece' Goldenrod

Heart-leafed goldenrod, *Solidago sphacelata* 'Golden Fleece', produces an abundance of luminous yellow flowers in a wild display that resembles a chenille blanket with its soft appearance and furrowed texture. This goldenrod reaches about 18 inches tall, give or take a few inches, and is tolerant of dry soils and light shade. Wood asters make great fall companions and the beautiful heart-shaped leaves contrast with the feathery foliage of blazing star (*Liatris* sp).

'Crown of Rays' Goldenrod

This clump-forming goldenrod hybrid features tiny, bright yellow flowers borne in dense, horizontal, plume-like panicles on the ends of upright, stiff, alternate-leaved stems growing to 24" tall. It has a long mid-summer to fall bloom period.

'Little Lemon' Goldenrod

This diminutive beauty is exceptionally compact with bright, light yellow flowers in late summer or early fall. It is a versatile and easy to grow native that combines well with purple and pink asters in the garden and in containers. Great as a cut flower, it is also very attractive to butterflies! It combines beautifully with *Liatris microcephalus*.