

My Favorite Fall Flowers

When the subject of Native Hill Country Wildflowers comes up, most folks think about bluebonnets, Indian blanket, Indian paintbrush, winecup, white prickly poppy—all things that bloom in the Spring. While I certainly like our spring flowers, I happen to like fall even more. Here are some of my favorite fall flowers, in no special order.

Gayfeather or liatris (*Liatris mucronata*) grows with erect stems up to 2 to 3 feet tall. The leaves are very numerous, narrow and long, and the flower head is a spire-like structure up to about a foot long. The flower head is made up of many small purple flowers with tiny purple threads or filaments sticking out, giving the flower head an interesting texture.

Maximilian sunflower (*Helianthus maximiliani*) is a very showy, large perennial plant that can grow up to about 6 feet tall. It tends to spread from a single stem to a round clump of stems that may be over six feet in diameter. The leaves are narrow and long (lanceolate), usually 2 to 4 inches long. In September and October the stems elongate and put up flower heads that open to individual 2 to 3 inch yellow flowers with yellow-orange disk (center) flowers. Interestingly, the flowers begin blooming from the top bud of the stalk first and progress to the lower buds—opposite from most flowers with multiple buds on a single stalk. Maximilian sunflowers are frequently seen as large green round hemispheres along road sides.

Tall goldenrod (*Solidago altissima*) is an impressive, erect plant up to 6 feet tall. The leaves are long and narrow, tapering to a point at both the tip and the base. It blooms in September and the flowers are composed of numerous small flowers along many branches off the stem, giving the whole 6 to 10 inches of the top of the plant a bright yellow color. There is also the smaller cousin of tall goldenrod, prairie goldenrod (*Solidago nemoralis*) which usually does not get over 2 feet in height. Both plants are perennials.

Common sunflower (*Helianthus annuus*) is usually 2 to 3 feet tall, but can be larger. It has thin, heart-shaped leaves on very rough, dark-colored stems. The flower heads can be 3 inches or more across with yellow petals and brown disk flowers. These are annual flowers that reseed themselves every year.

Anyone who loves butterflies should certainly have Gregg's mistflower, (*Conoclinium greggii*) in their garden. The plants are usually 2 to 3 feet tall with triangular-shaped, deeply incised leaves. The flower heads are a multi-branched umbrel of very small blue flowers with blue filaments making for a somewhat flat-topped, fuzzy, blue appearance. Butterflies really love this plant for nector, especially the queen butterfly. As I was writing this, I went out and looked at one of our clusters of Gregg's mistflower and

counted 5 queens and a monarch actively nectaring on the plants. It blooms from July to October.

Damianita (*Chrysactina mexicana*) is a small shrub-like, basketball-sized plant with dark green needle-like leaves and small yellow flowers at the tip of the branches. The contrast between the yellow flowers on top and the dark green underneath is striking. It is a very xeric plant requiring little water, and it blooms after rains beginning in April into the fall.

Cowpen daisy (*Verbesina encelioides*) produces 2 to 3 inch yellow daisy-like flowers with toothed petals. It has 2 to 3 inch heart-shaped, toothed leaves. It is an annual that reseeds itself quite well. It is often seen on dry, disturbed land and in areas where animals are fed, because it appears that nothing, including deer, eat it! It is also a larval plant for the bordered-patch butterfly.

Fall aster (*Symphotrichum oblongifolium*) (Say that three times quickly!) is a 2 foot tall plant with oblong or long narrow leaves. The flower on the end of stalks has purple to light purple petals with a yellow center.

Finally, there are a number of native grasses that make my favorite fall list. Lindheimer muhly is a grass that forms a 2 to 3 foot diameter bunch of long arching very narrow leaves and puts up attractive seed heads. Some folks refer to it as our native "pampas grass" only smaller and less of a fire hazard.

Indiangrass is in flower in September and October with striking yellow flowers on 2 to 4 foot stalks. Switchgrass is a 4 to 6 foot tall grass with large open-panicle seed heads.

Until next time...

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