

Native Plants Aren't for Everyone, But They Can Be Fun!

by Chris Kneupper

Being a plant nut, I often encounter the question: "I want to use natives, what should I plant?" My response is usually another question: "Where do you live, and what kind of soil do you have?" You see, soil type is probably the most important factor for plant success, with climate (amount of sun, rain, humidity, etc.) running a close second. Some wild plants thrive in the Alvin or Damon area, but don't like it in southern or central Brazoria County, and those near the sea are completely different than inland. The "pine belt" along Chocolate Bayou where it intersects Highway-35 or FM-1462 is a "little bit of east Texas" with Loblolly Pine, and is there because of the unusual acidic sandy soil along that ancient riverbed.

Brazoria County is blessed with a patchwork of different soils, arising out of the relatively recent geology of our county, and the different river systems (Colorado, Brazos, San Jacinto) whose ancient deltas wandered over and formed our current land surfaces. Generally, better-drained loamy or sandy soils are found in the northwest and eastern parts of the county, with the Brazos valley being more impermeable clay soils down through the center. These soils are occasionally riven by more-recent drainages, which have eroded channels in the older soils, and deposited more-recent ribbons of alluvial (well-drained) deposits along their banks.

For example, there are a number of interesting native herbaceous perennials that bloom this time of year, attracting all kinds of butterflies especially, that are well adapted to our local soils. Many other plants bloom in the spring, but these can bring some color and excitement to your yard in the late summer and fall. Generally, these are "prairie type" plants, relishing sunny locations for maximum bloom. Plants such as Blue Mistflower (*Conoclinium coelestinum*), Missouri Ironweed (*Vernonia missurica*), Rosinweed (*Silphium spp.*), American Germander (*Teucrium canadense*), White Boneset (*Eupatorium serotinum*), Beach Sunflower (*Helianthus debilis*, an annual), Tropical Sage (*Salvia coccineus*) and Maximilian Sunflower (*Helianthus maximiliani*) prefer well-drained locations. If you have low or boggy areas, then Swamp Sunflower (*Helianthus angustifolius*), Marsh Fleabane (*Pluchea odorata*, annual), Fall Obedient Plant (*Physostegia virginiana*), Rose-mallows (*Hibiscus spp.*) and Seaside Goldenrod (*Solidago sempervirens*) might be of interest. Many of these species can grow as tall as an adult person, so give them plenty of room ... and some can spread aggressively by seed or root suckers. They are also not as showy as horticultural selections, so they are not to everyone's tastes, but do have a subtle beauty. Some people even call them "weeds"! Boo, hiss!!

If you have a shady area, then some of our local woodland wildflowers (mostly perennial spring bloomers) can be fun as well, partnered with the fall-bloomers. Plants such as Heartleaf Skullcap (*Scutellaria ovata*), Common Selfheal (*Prunella vulgaris*), Gulf Coast Penstemon (*Penstemon tenuis*), Purple Meadow-Rue (*Thalictrum dasycarpum*), Wood Violets (*Viola spp.*) and Turk's Cap (*Malvaviscus spp.*) are good in these situations.

Remember, these species have evolved here, and nourish an array of native insects, hummingbirds, and small animals, which sustain a food chain for many of our other native birds and animals. So, they are great as additions to backyard habitats!

These unusual species are not often found in commercial nurseries, so to help facilitate backyard habitats for birds and pollinator insects, the non-profit organization Gulf Coast Bird Observatory (GCBO) has opened a niche nursery for local native and naturalized plants, open for self-service M-F 8:30am to 4:30pm. They are also holding their Fall Plant Sale on Saturday, October 19th from 8:00am to 12:00pm, where volunteers will be available to assist customers. Many of the species mentioned above can be found there, along with many others, with helpful advice from local naturalists.