

## Welcome to a Weedy World

All those weeds that escaped the clean up crews in yards and ditches are in bloom and are now wildflowers. One of the prettiest is the pink pea-like ground covering plant that unfortunately breaks when you try to pull it out, a major weed! Daisy-faced yellow hawkbeard brightens the ditches along with the white asters. In butterfly gardens the lovely mountain mint, *Pycnanthemum*, creates a soft lavender haze.

There are Deptford pinks and the white globes of garlic chives in the cracks in the pavement. Yellow partridge pea with its ferny foliage ventures even to the edges of highways. It will vanish in the wake of the mowers but it will return another fall. Country roads are brightened by a wealth of golden asters as well as the Rudbeckias, those black-eyed susans that have escaped their proper beds and are cavorting with the weeds.

There are cultivars of the *Solidago* species that are sufficiently well behaved for a perennial bed but if you are a rather lax bedkeeper you will have volunteer goldenrods. The Field Guide to Wildflowers by Roger Tory Peterson and Margaret McKenny has 14 pages devoted to goldenrods. I, too, am devoted to goldenrods but quite content to remain ignorant of the specifics of the 100 or so species of the genus *Solidago*. The species have been bred to become a well-behaved garden plant, but not very successfully as they remain determined to escape taming.

They are native to North America, a few in South America and Eurasia. A member of the asteraceae family, their charm lies in their bright yellow presence in late summer and early fall. You see them in Gloucester ditches early mornings adorned with dew-draped spiderwebs, a reward for heading out early.

Goldenrods are innocent of the charge that they are an allergen: it is the ragweed, in bloom at the same time, that is the culprit. Contrasting beautifully with their golden color is the blue of the fall blooming, tall version of *ageratum*, the mistflower, *Eupatorium coelestinum* that makes itself at home in sun or shade. Mistflowers, along with other wild things, emerge from the edges where the mulch gave out, a reprimand to the neat garden but a delight to small winged things.

Surely it is more fun to provide landing places for dragonflies and butterflies than to sacrifice the wildlings to severely trimmed hedges, cut grass and spots of color that stay where they are put. This summer has been a disappointment for watching butterflies. I hope it is just a seasonal vagary and not a trend. My neighbor has noticed that the dragonflies, although plentiful, are not as large as in other years.

The false dragonhead is another wildflower planted with perennials that has a way of wandering. If you are weeding out uninvited guest in early spring, you can recognize it by the finely toothed edge of its early leaves. *Physostegia virginiana* may slightly resemble a snapdragon but it is a mint relative. Its small mauve flowers parade up a square mint stem and have the three-lobed lip of the species.

Asters are delightful, blue, yellow, white, deep purple, crimson, so many dozens of varieties that telling them apart an occupation for someone with more time and patience than most of us have. I have one that refuses to bloom because it needs to be moved into a sunnier spot and rosy red ones that seem to wait for the weather to cool down. One tall lavender blue one that came from Niche Gardens a decade ago, now ranges all over the place but will bloom from Halloween until Thanksgiving so is forgiven its floppy ways. I have tried cutting it back about the 4<sup>th</sup> of July so it will remain shorter and upright but it still sagged.

I spare the New York ironweed, *Vernonia noveboracensis*, when I see it so that the butterflies will land on its tall deep bright purple flowers. The clusters of intricately formed flowers last for a month, a most elegant weed. Another plant with handsome foliage is thimbleweed, *Anemone virginiana*. The undistinguished flower that precedes the fruit, the thimble, has five, small greenish white petals. Actually the petals are sepals.

With wonderful dedication the native plant societies have taught us the value of native species that will provide beauty and color as well as a habitat for the insects and critters that complete our specific ecosystem. Wildflower defenders face a challenge because it is so human to want to dominate the world. We want to tame our surroundings, boss those wild things into neatly drawn borders. Don't we know that when we win we lose?

11Sept14