Glorious Goldenrods

Colorful mainstays of the garden from midsummer into fall, goldenrods also set the table for a diverse array of pollinators and other wildlife.

BY C. COLSTON BURRELL

The waning days of summer in Virginia, where I live, bring meadows awash with the effervescent yellows of goldenrods (Solidago spp.). A roadside stroll with a good wildflower identification guide in hand can easily turn up to species. This scene is repeated across North America as the brilliant cadmium yellow flowers of the 100 or so native species come into bloom.

Goldenrods are members of the aster family (Asteraceae), and the bulk of the world’s species are native to North America, with the largest concentration east of the Rocky Mountains. The name Solidago, which translates from Latin roughly as “make whole,” acknowledges the genus’s long history of medicinal uses. It has been used to treat a variety of ailments ranging from snakebites to bee stings, sore throats, stomach aches, bleeding, and kidney stones. A beautiful yellow dye is also derived from the flowers.

For gardeners, goldenrods’ primary allure is their late flowering season, helping bridge the color void from summer into fall. They are also long-lasting cut flowers. Numerous goldenrods are eminently gardenworthy, yet only a few species have made it into mainstream horticulture, partly because of a case of mistaken identity. Unfounded fears that goldenrods attract a phenomenal array of pollinators, says Neil Diboll of Prairie Nursery in Westfield, Wisconsin. “The flowers are absolutely abuzz throughout the day with bees, butterflies, beneficial parasitic wasps, beetles, innocuous flies, beetles, and a multitude of other flower visitors.”

Beauty, variety, and wildlife value notwithstanding, some goldenrods spread too aggressively via rhizomes—underground stems—to be good garden citizens. “American goldenrods present a definite love–hate relationship,” Di-boll acknowledges. “A few are thugs that should be avoided.” Among these are Canada goldenrod (Solidago canadensis), tall goldenrod (S. altissima), flat-top goldenrod (Euthamia graminifolia), syn. S. graminifolia), and giant goldenrod (S. gigantea).

GOOD CHOICES FOR THE GARDEN

Few perennials are as easy to grow as goldenrods. All tolerate a wide range of soil pH and moisture conditions, and once established, they withstand drought. Most species perform best in full sun or light shade, but in the following descriptions of recommended species and selections, I have included two that will thrive in a partly shaded site. Several additional choices are included in the chart on page 34.

As is the case with many plant groups, nomenclatural changes have resulted in a few species being reassigned to different genera; these are shown with both the new and former names.

- GOLDENRODS FOR SUN

Early goldenrod (S. juncea, USDA Hardiness Zones 3–8, AHS Heat Zones 8–1) is the first species to bloom—often appearing in July—long before you expect to see a goldenrod in flower. Showy tree-shaped inflorescences with drooping branches crown one- to three-foot-tall leafy red stems. Plants form tufted basal rosettes of smooth, deep green, slightly toothed leaves. One distinctive feature of this species is small tufts of leaves that form in the axils of the stem leaves. Mature plants form open leaf clumps with many stems radiating from the center. Early goldenrod’s native habitat comprises meadows, savannas, open woods, and seashores from Nova Scotia and Maine south to Georgia and Missouri.

The flowers of early goldenrod (S. juncea) fall into the tree-branched category.
Gray goldenrod (*Solidago nemoralis*, Zones 2–9, 9–1) is a delicate yet sophisticated species with tufts of soft hair, elongated gray-green leaves in tidy clumps. The leafy flower stalks are crowned with elongated, narrow, one-sided flower plumes. Plants are quite variable in size, ranging from one to six inches tall on poor dry sites, to up to two feet in rich moist soil. Mature clumps are tough as nails, tolerating winter snow and sleet, summer drought, and occasional dog stops. This species is native to meadows, prairies, open woods, roadsides, and eroded slopes from Nova Scotia and Alberta, south to Florida and Texas.

Sweet goldenrod (*S. adenophora*, Zones 1–9, 9–1) is an upright, two- to five-foot-tall species with wiry black to ruddy stems sparingly clothed in smooth, lance-shaped foliage. The stems are crowned with open, one-sided, treelike flower clusters from July to September. “The foliage is anise-scented, and the plant as a whole is clump-forming and well-behaved,” says Mary Ann King of Pine Ridge Gardens in London, Arkansas. Grow this goldenrod in relatively lean soil because plants are inclined to flop if the soil is too rich. It is found in dry, open woods, meadows, and dunes from Vermont and Ontario, south to Florida and Texas.

The flattened inflorescences of stiff goldenrod (*Oligoneuron rigidum*, syn. *S. rigida*, Zones 3–9, 9–1) give it a lovely, distinctive appearance. The broad and gently mounded flower clusters rise on two- to five-foot-tall stems, creating a brilliant yellow display in late summer. Manure plants form dense tufts of fuzzy basal and stem leaves. These are gray-green in summer and turn dusky rose in autumn. This striking plant is native to dry or moist prairies, meadows, clearings, and roadsides from Connecticut to Saskatchewan and south to Georgia and New Mexico.

The flower buds of rough-stemmed goldenrod (*S. rugosa*, Zones 4–9, 9–1) produce an attractive, chartreuse base in advance of its spectacular bright and clear, multi-branched yellow flowers, which bloom between September and November on leafy stems one to five feet tall. “The species is so tough, so hardy, it will grow in almost any type of soil,” says King. A selection called ‘Fireworks’, a selection of creeping goldenrod (*S. sphacelata*, Zones 4–9, 9–1) is one of the newest goldenrods to make the rounds is ‘Solar Cascade’ (Zones 6–9, 9–1), a Federally Endangered species, was developed and released by the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden in an effort to conserve the species. “One of the newest goldenrods to make the rounds is ‘Solar Cascade’ (Zones 6–9, 9–1)”

For perfect color harmony, it’s hard to beat this combination of ‘Golden Fleece’ goldenrod and ‘October Skies’ aromatic aster (*Symphyotrichum oblongifolium*) at the New York Botanical Garden.  

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The American Gardener

MORE GARDENWORTHY GOLDENRODS

**Name** | **Height/Spread** | **Characteristics** | **Origins** | **USDA Hardiness, AHS Heat Zones**
---|---|---|---|---
Solidago bicolor (silverrod) | 1–3½ ft. | Elongated spikes of short-stalked flower heads with distinctive white to yellowish-white rays surrounding a yellow central disk atop a hairy, thin, wiry, greyish stem. | Eastern North America except Florida | 3–8, 8–1

Solidago curtissii (mountain or Curtis' goldenrod) | 1–2½ ft. | Leafy wand-like flowerheads. Bright green leaves ascend the stem to the base of the inflorescence. | Mid-Atlantic and Southeast U.S. | 5–8, 8–1

Solidago ‘Little Lemon’ | 6–12/12–24 in. | Compact hybrid for the front of the border and edging, with leafy heads of clear yellow, early flowers. | Hybrid | 5–9, 9–1

Solidago multiflora (alpine goldenrod) | 6–24/1–2½ ft. | Elongated, dense wand of showy flowers and lanceolate to spatulate leaves up to 8 inches long; height varies with site conditions. | Montana west to south to New Mexico | 3–8, 8–1

Solidago puberula (downy goldenrod) | 2–3½/1–2 ft. | Flowers, among the largest in the genus, are clustered to form dense, tubular, bottlebrush-like yellow spikes. | Eastern North America | 4–9, 9–1

Solidago riddellii (Riddell's goldenrod) | 2–3½/1 ft. | Tiny, bright yellow flowers borne in dense, erect, flat-topped, terminal inflorescences atop stiff, glabrous stems. | Northern North America east of the Rockies | 3–7, 7–1

Solidago rugosa (Roan Mountain goldenrod) | 1–2½/1–2 ft. | Tight clumps of vertical stalks open from early July to October as branched, bottlebrush-like inflorescences of bright yellow. | Mid-Atlantic and Southeast U.S. | 6–8, 8–1

Solidago spathulata (spoon-leaf goldenrod) | 1–3½ ft./variable by conditions | Upright stems with open, narrow branches and inflorescences of bright flowers that arch or stand erect, variable in size and form. | Oregon and California | 7–10, 10–7

**Features**

- Oval to lance-shaped leaves. Showy goldenrod is native to open woods, savannas, meadows, and dry prairie from New England to Minnesota and Wyoming, south to Georgia and Texas.
- Zigzag goldenrod (S. uliginosa, Zones 3–8, 8–1) resembles a gauzy manila yellow lantai. Thick two- to three-foot stems bear button-like clusters of rich lemon-yellow flowers in September and October. The quilted, sparsely-shaped basal leaves lend a bold accent to the summer garden. This lovely species has a more northerly range than many other goldenrods and is intolerant of extended warm temperatures. And, as the common name indicates, it will grow best in reasonably moist sites. It’s native to bogs, wet meadows, ditches, and low woods from Newfoundland and Minnesota, south to New Jersey and Indiana, and in the mountains south to North Carolina.
- Western gardeners need not feel left out, because they can grow velvety or California goldenrod (S. velutina, Zones 4–10, 10–1), a lovely plant with narrowly branched, erect inflorescences of showy flowers. The leafy stems rise one to two feet, with the wand of abundant, loosely packed florets stretching up to a foot higher to provide a burst of brilliant yellow from late summer through fall. Clumps gradually spread into a groundcover that can help curb erosion. Widely native to western North America from the Black Hills west to southern Canada and Mexico, it is variable in size and habit depending on provenance.

**TWO FOR SHADE**

Wreath or bluestemmed goldenrod (S. cana, Zones 4–9, 9–1) is a spiky, wand-flowered goldenrod with blue green, linear leaves alternating up smooth, wiry, one- to three-foot stems. The leaves innervate into the inflorescence, but droop below the arching stem while the flowers face upward. The medium yellow flowers begin opening in early fall and last for several weeks. This underutilized species adds an elegant spot of late-season color when planted in rich, moist soil in part to full shade. It is native to open woods, woodland borders and clearings from Nova Scotia and Wisconsin, south to Florida and Texas.

Zigzag goldenrod (S. flexicaulis, Zones 3–8, 8–1) is named for its distinctive, kinked stems, which bend back and forth at 45-degrees angles between the nodes. The one- to three-foot tall stems bear rounded, toothed leaves that intermingle with the wandlike clusters of starry, medium-yellow flowers. In autumn, when color in the shade is at a premium, zigzag goldenrod brightens up darkened recesses and woodland edges. Its native habitat is deciduous woods, clearings, and roadsides from Nova Scotia and North Dakota south to Georgia and Arkansas.

**GARDEN PLACEMENT AND COMPANIONS**

Their variety of forms and lengthy bloom period make goldenrods integral to late summer and autumn color schemes. Observing them in their native habitat is the best guide to garden placements, though most species exhibit broad adaptability. The key is to site them where their tidy green foliage is balanced by colorful companions until they are ready to burst into bloom.

In my southern Virginia garden, visitors are often astounded by the assortment of species and the magnitude of the display. The tough species from dry sites are perfect for sunny banks and boulevard plantings where conditions are punishing. In early August, the lemon lollipops of showy goldenrod light up the street perimeter. Later in the season, golden daisies of gray goldenrod are perfect to echo the russet stalks of little bluebonnet (Lupinus nanus). A loose clump of stiff or Fireworks’ goldenrod can anchor a spot and serve as a striking focal point.

In sunny borders, species like early goldenrod, ‘Solar Cascade’, and spiky yellow may be discovered in my neighbor’s gardens. The rush is on!

**MAINTENANCE TIPS**

Cut back the stems of tall or lax-stemmed species to four inches in late spring to promote shorter, more upright growth. Clump-forming selections should be divided every three years or so to prevent central dieback and keep them from outgrowing their space. Leave at least some of the seedheads on the plants through winter, because these will provide food for birds. The autumn glow of goldenrods warms my garden in the slanting light that signals the passing of the growing season. Soon, frost will decorate the delicate dried plumes, and silvery seed heads will float on the wind to new destinations. With any luck, I am spreading the wealth around. Next year, gold may be discovered in my neighbor’s gardens. The rush is on!

Author, garden tour host, and garden design consultant C. Colman Burrell has spent a lifetime studying native plants. He gardens on a 5 acres of woodlands and meadows in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia.

Native to western North America, California goldenrod can spread to form a groundcover.