

Gaura, a Low-Maintenance Perennial

By Susan Camp

It isn't easy to grow flowers when you spend a lot of time traveling. When Jim and I decided last summer to take a month-long tour of Eastern Europe in April and May, we knew we would face some problems, including missing the bloom-time of some of our favorites and not knowing which plants had survived the winter. We arrived home two weeks ago after a glorious journey through some of the most beautiful cities on earth to discover far less damage than we had anticipated.

The peonies and irises bloomed while we were away, although one lovely pink peony waited for us to return. The four Old Garden Roses survived their first coastal Virginia winter, having grown to three times their size at planting. They are still blooming, and the foliage is green and healthy. We lost some verbena 'Homestead Purple' and many of our lavender 'Munstead' and 'Hidcote.'

Last weekend we moved some of the remaining verbena to fill empty spaces in another bed and we replaced the lavender plants. We wanted to add some color, and since we have several shorter trips planned for the summer and fall, low-maintenance, drought-resistant plants that bloom all season were a must. We decided on gaura (*Oenothera lindheimeri*, previously *Gaura lindheimeri*), a North American native wildflower that now is found over most of the country. Common names include beeblossom, wandflower, and whirling butterflies because of the appearance of the flowers in a breeze.

Native gaura grows to a height of 3 to 5 feet with a spread of 1 to 2 feet. Wiry, flexible stems emerge from a tap-rooted clump, bearing dark green, lance-shaped leaves and delicate, four-petaled white blossoms that shade into pale pink. The plant has a somewhat weedy, leggy appearance and seedlings and new growth from underground rhizomes can crowd out other plants, but, fortunately, gaura cultivars abound that minimize invasiveness and improve appearance. Most gaura cultivars bloom from late spring through mid fall.

Gaura looks best when it is massed along a fence border or at the back of a flowerbed, so we selected three cultivars to plant together. A white variety, officially named 'Whirling Butterflies,' is sterile, so seedlings are not a problem. It grows 2 to 3 feet tall with a spread of similar size. The red stems and maroon-spotted leaves make a striking contrast to the bright white flowers. 'Siskiyou Pink' is a popular variety that grows to 2 ½ to 3 feet on wiry stems. Flowers are rose pink and leaves are mottled with maroon. 'Rosyjane' is a compact variety, reaching 20 to 24 inches in height, with a spread of 16 to 24 inches. Foliage is deep green, turning a rosy shade in cool weather. The delightful blossoms are white with cherry-pink edges.

Gaura grows best in full sun, but it can take light shade. It will survive in almost any soil with an acid, neutral, or alkaline pH in USDA Hardiness Zones 5 through 9. In other words, it isn't a

fussy plant. Its only requirement is good drainage. It will die in wet soil, especially in the winter. Gaura doesn't even need fertilizer, which can leave the stems weak and floppy.

Cut gaura back by one half its height midway through the growing season to encourage a stronger, more compact habit and new blooms. Cut stems back to the leafy clump in the spring. You can propagate your gaura plants from spring seedlings that have sprouted from fertile varieties.

Root rot can occur if it is planted in poorly drained soil. Rust and powdery mildew sometimes are an issue. Aphids, whiteflies, Japanese and flea beetles can attack gaura. Some sources state that gaura is short-lived, but we had an unnamed variety in our previous garden for about 15 years.

Gaura is one of the easiest perennials to maintain that you will ever add to your garden. It is even drought and deer resistant. Enjoy your travels, free from garden angst!

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