

THE COLOR OF SUMMER

For the past steamy month the bright rose heads of the coneflower, *Echinacea purpurea* have brightened my dry and weedy flower beds. Incidentally, a hose is no match for this dry spell. We need days of quiet rain, not the stormy gulps that run to the gutter.

Most of these coneflowers are descendents of a packet of seeds so there is little variety. A small plant of *E. 'White Swan'* has lived without flourishing for years and unlike the other has not seeded itself promiscuously everywhere. I welcome these seedlings, admiring their ability to provide unexpected patches of color, always a plus in a garden as deficient in style as mine is. The newest blooms have the strongest shades of rose so I try to keep the faded-to-pink oldies cut back to encourage new growth. By late-August I'll let them be to provide lots of cones for the goldfinches to tussle over.

Fascinated by the cultivars appearing in glossy catalogues, I am waiting for these glorious sorts to appear in six-packs, but I doubt they become inexpensive any time soon! Meantime I was interested to read in the August/September issue of *Horticulture Magazine* the story of these cultivars. Two different programs in the mid 1990s resulted in this explosion of form and color.

Richard and Bobby Saul, co-owners of Itsaul Plants in Atlanta, Georgia were looking for a solution to the problem of winter loss in their potted coneflowers. The introduction of genes from *Echinacea paradoxa*, the golden coneflower, gave not only stability but curious crosses. From seeds shared with Tony Avent, owner of Plants Delight Nursery, emerged a lemon-yellow coneflower. Possibilities beckoned!

During the same period, Dr. Jim Ault, Director of Environmental Horticulture at the Chicago Botanic Garden, worked to develop hybrids in new colors with the increased cold and drought tolerance needed in the Illinois area. Other plant breeders in the United States and Europe are increasing their stock of *Echinacea* in not only improved forms and colors, but with fragrant forms as well. Some day we may have a rainbow in one species.

For late summer bloom a flower that is truly a royal shade of purple, not lavender nor magenta, you can plant New York ironweed, *Vernonia noveboracensis*. Depending on your point of view, this is either a weed or a wildflower. The eight-foot plant I have come with the lot and when its purple fringe is alive with butterflies, it earns its place. I meant to cut it back in late May just to see if it would flower if

kept shorter, but neglected to. Newer offspring are a mere three feet, so it does take a while to soar. This native has long slender leaves alternate along the dark stems. Unlike the tall milkweed near it whose heavy heads bend their stems, the ironweed stays erect. It's a tough old survivor, an admirable trait in any plant.

ENVIRONMENTAL NOTE:

As gardeners we are intimately involved with the protection of the good earth, but we are always on the lookout for tips to make our efforts more effective. Reading a list of such suggestions, I was struck by how obvious they seemed to be. Not because I am so aware, but because I am so old! Some tapes in my head date to the depression years – ‘flip off the lights, turn down the thermostat, don't let the water run’. These admonitions are the ingrained frugality of my generation.

What I do need advice about is the disposal of things like oil, batteries, paint, and light bulbs containing mercury. Much as I like having plastic bags to line scrap baskets, I am dutifully toting canvas bags to the checkout counters. Since I live where I trust the tap water, I've never been forced to buy water although I do use a filter pitcher to improve the taste of water for tea or coffee.

About water: economists who talk about peak oil also discuss peak water. Oceans abound but until desalinization is economically feasible, fresh water will be a critical commodity. One billion of the world's people have limited access to fresh water and thousands die daily for lack of clean water. These facts make us realize what a gift our water is, make us use it with respect. Surely water should never go to the highest bidder in a commodities market.