

Ask a Master Gardener

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### Goldenrod

Q. I love seeing the goldenrod that is starting to bloom, but hate what the pollen does to my allergies. Is there an alternative to this fall flower?

A. Certainly there are many lovely and bright fall flowers: Asters, Chrysanthemums, Helianthus (Perennial Sunflower), and Heliopsis (False Sunflower) just to name a few. However, goldenrod pollen is not the culprit in the sneezing and itching eyes you are starting to experience. Goldenrod, *Solidago*, is wrongly accused of causing the uncomfortable symptoms that many folks encounter this time of year. Goldenrod pollen is quite large and sticky so as to better adhere to the body of visiting insects. Because of this, goldenrod pollen does not become airborne. The true cause of most fall pollen allergies is the wind-pollinated ragweeds and grasses. These are the guilty parties that broadcast profuse amounts of lightweight pollen into the air.

There is an old folk's tale that says that when the goldenrod begins to turn its vibrant yellow and gold, frost will arrive in six weeks. I've kept track of this for a few years and it does seem to ring true. If one gives it some thought, the average first frost date for our area is from last week of October to the first week in November. Have you seen the goldenrod putting on its show yet? It might be fun to mark your calendar when you see the first fully open flowers, and then see when you have the first frost. This predictor is not very scientific, but it is fun. I always use the flowering of goldenrod to remind me that there are fall garden and landscape chores to take care of before the first frost.

There are over 100 varieties in the goldenrod family within a range that covers most of North America. Blue-Stemmed Goldenrod or Wreath Goldenrod (*Solidago caesia*) is a well-behaved species and does not spread aggressively. It forms attractive loose clumps 1 ½ to 3 feet tall with arching stems and long, thin leaves. Stem color in mature plants has a dark, somewhat bluish tone. Sweet goldenrod (*Solidago odora*) is easily identified by its anise-scented leaves. Many people make a tea from the leaves. Sweet Goldenrod is primarily clump-forming with a height of 2 to 4 feet. Common or Field Goldenrod (*Solidago canadensis*) is probably what one sees along roadsides and fields. It is very aggressive and should only be used in areas where one is not particular about it spreading. It can reach up to 6 feet tall, but is well loved by butterflies and other pollinators. There are several hybrid cultivars including 'Little Lemon' and 'Fireworks'.

*Solidago* is easily grown in average, dry to medium, well-drained soils in full sun to part shade. It tolerates poor, dry soils and light shade, but performs best in full sun. Many on-line seed companies offer a huge variety of goldenrods, with some offering quart or smaller sized pots that can be planted now. If you opt to obtain seeds, sow them outdoors in a weed free seedbed. *Solidago* seeds benefits

from a late fall planting. The cold, moist weather of winter will actually help break the dormancy of the flower seeds. When temperatures warm in the spring, the seed will begin to germinate.

So, think again about goldenrod, as it is a really wonderful and important plant for attracting butterflies and other pollinators. The lateness of its bloom offers nectar and pollen when most other sources are gone. Thus any migrating butterflies can use the goldenrod nectar as fuel to continue on their journey, and those that overwinter here in Georgia will benefit as they race to form their chrysalis for their winter rest. The pollen provides a food source for native bees and other pollinators that play a critically important role in plant reproduction of many fruits and vegetables. A real plus is that deer do not tend to browse on this lovely fall flower.

For more information or answers to any other gardening questions, contact a Master Gardener Extension Volunteer at 770-836-8546, via e-mail at [ccmg@uga.edu](mailto:ccmg@uga.edu) or visit our office in the Ag Center at 900 Newnan Road in Carrollton.