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For Gardens and Pollinators, Goldenrod Is Pure Gold

Kathy Connolly

Let's get something out of the way: If you have late summer allergies, it's not the goldenrod. The much plainer ragweed (*Ambrosia artemisiifolia*) sends buckets of pollen into the atmosphere around this time of year in a bid to find and pollinate other ragweed plants. It is a prime suspect behind late summer sneezes.

Goldenrod, on the other hand, is insect-pollinated. Its pollen sticks to the plant, where a happy host of bees and other insects have a feeding fest. In fact, some experts call it our single most valuable perennial plant for pollinators.

“Goldenrods are a tremendous resource for a wide diversity of insects, including both specialist and generalist bees,” says Kimberly Stoner, Ph.D., an associate scientist at the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station who specializes in bees. “Goldenrod is a major resource for honey bees, both nectar and pollen. Dozens of other bee species also visit goldenrod, including bumble bees, long-horned bees, sweat bees, and many of the digger bees active in the fall.”

She points to research done by Jarrod Fowler for the Xerces Society, which shows there are 11 species of solitary bees that are goldenrod specialists in New England.

Yes, goldenrods are good for pollinators, but are they good landscape plants? Let us count the ways: New England has at least eight native species in the genus (*Solidago* spp.), as different from one another in some ways as roses from geraniums. What they have in common is that they are vigorous self-seeders, come back year after year, offer brilliant color, and rarely need supplemental water. Fertilizer? Forget it.

Goldenrod can be so vigorous and tall, I've often heard complaints about the plant—and tales of trying to eradicate it. But many people don't know the varieties of goldenrods. The New England Wild Flower Society (NEWFS) in Whately and Framingham, Massachusetts, propagates a variety of goldenrods from regionally harvested seeds and offers plants for sale.

According to Alexis Doshas, a NEWFS greenhouse grower, one of the group's favorite recommendations is July-blooming licorice goldenrod (*Solidago odora*).

“We love this plant for its elegant habit, bloom, and fragrance,” she says. “It's a good choice for the home garden.”

If short stature is your preference, says Doshas, “The most compact is gray goldenrod (*Solidago nemoralis*). But it requires poor soils to thrive.”

In other words, this September-bloomer thrives where others fear to tread.

Got shade? Goldenrod has you covered.

“Both blue-stemmed goldenrod (*Solidago caesia*) and zig-zag goldenrod (*Solidago flexicaulis*) do well in part-shade or shade,” says Doshas. “They also have compact habits and interesting blooms.”

Looking for an elegant late-bloomer? There's nothing like the intense yellow and strong spikes of showy goldenrod (*Solidago speciosa*) when other landscape plants are going brown.

Need a plant for salt marsh or seaside areas? Seaside goldenrod (*Solidago sempervirens*) may be the answer.

Doshas says that two native goldenrods may be the source of the impression that these plants are too tall. “Canada goldenrod (*Solidago canadensis*) and wrinkle-leaved goldenrod (*Solidago rugosa*) can be tall, floppy, vigorous spreaders,” she says. “They’re fine for roadsides and meadows, but maybe not for cultivated perennial beds.”

So let’s get rid of rags and keep the gold.

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