



Master Gardener Newspaper

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Summer Drought "Warriors"

by Susan Franciskovich, UCCE Master Gardener

Knowing that this summer and its drought conditions were going to be challenging, I decided that my garden and I were going to make the best of it! First and foremost, I have been careful to see that our water "allotments" are concentrated on our trees, both fruit and landscape. I have invested lots of time and energy into my trees over many years, and do not want to lose them. Additionally, I have tried to keep all garden areas weed-free, since savvy gardeners are not about to water a flourishing crop of weeds. Finally, I have dead-headed and cut back "all things brown and dead" to keep the garden looking healthy, yet waiting long enough to be sure that bees and hummingbirds were done gathering nectar from withering blossoms.

But now to the heart of the matter; along with all the efforts listed above, a few flowering plants in my garden have definitely taken the lead this summer and have been strong and showy "drought warriors:" Coneflowers, Black Eyed Susans, and Cosmos. These are all common blooms but are often overlooked. With our current drought conditions, I have gained a deeper appreciation for their performance and "drought warrior" status in my garden.

Coneflowers can be exceptionally showy. These native Echinacea cultivars are perennials with sensational cone-shaped flowers that bloom from summer to fall. Coneflowers are butterfly and bee magnets and are easy to grow in the central valley climate. They reach a height of 3 to 4 feet. They like full sun and well-drained soil, with moderate, regular watering. Those in my garden have not "complained" with less water, because their long tap root reaches deep for moisture. The biggest transformation in coneflowers has been in the range of colors available. There are now many beautiful colors beyond the traditional pinks and purples, including shades of white, yellow, red and orange. A single coneflower plant makes a showy centerpiece in a mixed garden.

Another cheerful garden stalwart is Rudbekias. These traditional and beloved favorites are commonly known as Black Eyed Susans, a bit like an Echinacea (to which they are related), but in a different "dress." These warm-hued golden daisies have a dark beehive-like center, produce long-lasting blooms from summer to fall, and typically reach a height of 3 feet, though there are taller varieties. Birds, butterflies and beneficial insects are attracted to these tough and easy to grow descendants of the rangy and rampant wildflower plants, native to the eastern United States. Black Eyed Susans love full sun but will tolerate some shade and can handle drought conditions. They make nice cut flowers and cutting also encourages late season re-blooming. There are a number of pretty Rudbekia cultivars and they are an excellent companion to Coneflowers.

The third great garden performer this summer has been the trusty Cosmos. It's interesting to note that the word "cosmos" has Greek origins, and roughly means, a "balanced universe." These quintessential cottage garden



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flowers are perfectly named. They mix well with just about everything in the garden and add balance, color and pure joy for birds, bees and butterflies. They are simple and easy to grow, can handle drought and poor soil, and will bloom heavily until frost. Cosmos can be perennials or annuals; the most common variety in our area is an annual, *Cosmos bipinnatus*, which will re-seed and grow again in spring. Be prepared: cosmos can grow up to 8 feet tall and sometimes need staking.

I hope you feel inspired to find some good "drought warriors" for your garden.

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