

Reliable Rudbeckias

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As a plant salesperson here in North Florida, I often hear, "I am looking for a plant that is foolproof, tough, and that will give an extended show of color with little care." One of my first suggestions is rudbeckias, also commonly known as yellow coneflowers or black-eyed Susans.

This group of diverse annuals and perennials is easy to grow, reliable, and long blooming. Rudbeckias are native to North America and the majority of species are indigenous to the central and southeastern United States. Rudbeckias are as popular with die-hard gardeners as they are with beginners. Although black-eyed Susans may seem common, their sunny, colorful faces and ease in growing make them hard to beat.

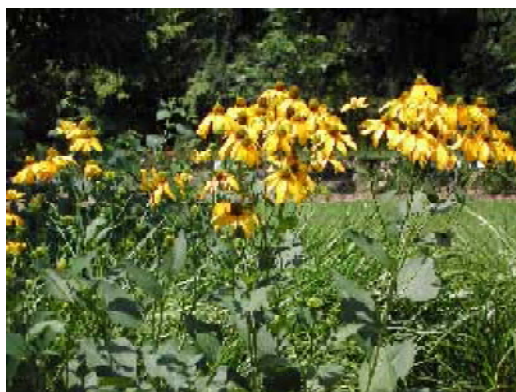
Rudbeckias thrive with ease in average soil in full sun to part sun and the majority are drought tolerant, once established. Choose several different varieties to extend the season of color. For instance, in my garden, *Rudbeckia triloba* begins blooming in late June, *R. fulgida* in mid to late July, and *R. laciniata* in late July to early August. The annual varieties and cultivars tend to offer even longer bloom times.

The following descriptions of some tried and true Rudbeckias are sure to help you find one or more for your garden.

R. fulgida is native to the Southeast. It readily colonizes in good rich soil. The cultivar 'Goldsturm' is a compact grower, with abundant traditional brown-eyed Susan flowers. A great cut flower, it's no wonder this gem has become one of our most popular perennials.

R. triloba (three lobed coneflower) is a multi-stemmed, bush-like plant with scads of small yellow flowers with a bluish-black raised center. Technically a biennial, this plant has performed as a perennial in my garden.

R. maxima (giant coneflower) is aptly named, for it is truly a giant at a whopping seven to eight feet. Its blue-gray green foliage is evergreen in my garden and sends upright flower stalks in late May with drooping yellow petals surrounding a black conical center.



R. laciniata (cut-leaf coneflower) cultivar 'Herbstonne' is perhaps my favorite rudbeckia of all. Herbstonne translates to autumn sun, which is fitting for this late summer, early autumn bloomer. Its deeply lobed foliage is evergreen and its tall stalks produce lemon-yellow petals, which circle a raised green cone. It can reach heights of seven feet. Partial sun, rather than full sun, is best for cut-leaf coneflower.

R. hirta (black-eyed Susan) is the only commonly grown annual species. The native species produces abundant flowers and reseeds well. Some of the best performing

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cultivars are 'Becky', a collection of compact plants, up to one foot, with yellow, orange and gold flowers, three to four inches in size. 'Irish or Green Eyes' bears slender yellow rays around a yellow-green disk and is two to three feet in height. 'Indian Summer' is striking with curled and drooping golden yellow petals surrounding a flattened large brown disk and reaching a height of three to four feet. All three cultivars do best in full sun and prefer our hot dry summers, and may not be as happy when we experience our super rainy summers.

For more information about gardening in our area, visit the University of Florida IFAS Leon County Extension website at <http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu>.

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