



ECHINACEA – NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN CONEFLOWERS

Purple coneflowers (*Echinacea* spp.) are a mainstay in the summer garden. Their botanical name, inspired by the spiky cones in the center of each flower, comes from the Greek word *echinos*, which means hedgehog.

This native prairie plant has earned its place in our hearts and gardens because of its beauty, hardiness, and appeal to wildlife. Its cones offer a resting spot and nectar for butterflies; its seed heads provide nourishment to birds in the winter. Coneflowers also entice beneficial pollinators into the landscape.

When its flowers are cut fresh, the tall sturdy stems support daisy-like blooms that are incredibly long-lasting in arrangements. The cones can also be used in dried arrangements or to add interest to everlasting wreaths. Save some to use in holiday arrangements.

These stalwart plants do not make many cultural demands on a gardener. They prefer to be planted in a sunny spot in well-drained soil but are tolerant of many growing conditions. A little afternoon shade may enhance

the richness of the flower color. You do not have to remember to fertilize coneflowers - they favor lean soil instead of deep rich loam. Once established, their long taproots help them tolerate summer droughts, and they are hardy enough to scoff at our harsh Midwest winters.



Purple coneflowers rarely need division and would prefer not to be moved once established. Self-sown seedlings will provide you with additional plants that can easily be moved to other spots. While purple coneflowers have always played an important role in the perennial border or cottage garden - cheerfully blooming from mid summer into early autumn - until recently pink and white were the only two colors they could offer to a planting scheme.

In 2004, Jim Ault of The Chicago Botanic Garden announced the creation of a new coneflower, Orange Meadowbrite, with orange petals instead of the usual

pink, and the 'purple' coneflower revolution began.

Several other varieties of purple coneflowers have followed close behind. If you haven't checked out the *Echinacea* section of your local nursery lately, you will be surprised at the incredible selection. Here are just a few:

Orange Coneflowers

Appropriately named, Harvest Moon sports earthy gold, fragrant flowers with a golden orange cone. This variety grows 24 to 30 inches tall.

Sundown boasts dark orange, rose-scented blooms over sturdy 3 foot stems.

White Coneflowers

White Swan has pure white petals surrounding copper-colored cones. It grows 2 feet tall and has a slight, honey-like fragrance. Cygnet White, sometimes referred to as Baby White Swan, is a compact version of White Swan staying a more modest 15 to 20 inches tall.

Fragrant Angel grows 2-1/2 feet tall. The golden orange cone sits in the center of two rows of overlapping petals held horizontally for a full, frilly look. Aptly named, it has a lovely honey-phlox scent.

Pink Coneflowers

Magnus is probably the most popular of the pink coneflowers and was named the Perennial Plant of the Year in 1998. Growing up to 3 feet tall, its deep pink horizontally-held petals surround dark orange cones.

Prairie Splendor blooms significantly earlier than other purple coneflowers and continues blooming until the first frost. It remains a compact 18 to 24 inches tall making it perfect not only for the garden but also for container plantings.

Ruby Giant is a cultivar celebrated for its very large, dark ruby-pink flowers.

These are just a few - there are many more varieties from which to choose. Selecting one is the difficult part; using them in the landscape is easy.

Partner them with soft-textured plants to offset the coarseness of their dark green, toothed foliage.

They partner nicely with any of the ornamental grasses, or combine them with yarrow and salvia for a terrific trio. Another option

is to plant them with other prairie-type plants like butterfly weed and Joe Pye weed in a garden that butterflies will adore.

Equally at home in a meadow or prairie planting and a perennial border, 'purple' coneflowers deserve a place in your landscape. And as breeding work continues, you will continue to see lots of new varieties at your favorite garden center. Can a red coneflower be far behind?