

Conservation Corner

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“The lovely flowers embarrass me, they make me regret I am not a bee.” Emily Dickinson

As the last flowers of the season grace our prairies and roadsides, let's encounter the goldenrod - one of the mainstays of the tallgrass biome and a golden sign of autumn. From August to October, their golden showy blooms complement the bright purple asters on nature's color wheel. Goldenrods were even included in my mom's collection of weather sayings – When the first goldenrod blooms, 6 weeks until frost.

Goldenrods are members of the aster family. Their genus name, *Solidago*, comes from Latin *solidus* or *solidare* which means “to make whole” or “to strengthen” and refers to the healing powers of goldenrod. Native Americans treated bee stings with goldenrod lotions while swollen throats were treated with a tea made by boiling its leaves.

Goldenrods are coarse, erect perennials that often grow in clumps. Their fibrous root systems allow survival among prairie grasses, and some species may grow to heights of 6-8 feet. Their leaves are often hairy, giving the plant a pale green or grayish cast. It is their flowers, however, that give goldenrods their name and fame. Each flower head is composed of thousands of small, tubular, nectar-filled disk flowers surrounded by ray flowers and covered in pollinators as honeybees, bumble bees, and wasps search for late fall nectar.

Goldenrod is mostly native to North America and may be found in fields, forests, roadsides, and orchards across the United States, Mexico, and Canada. Goldenrod plants readily hybridize in both the wild and nursery, resulting in 100-200 different varieties. Locally, our most common species are the stiff and showy goldenrod. Did you know goldenrods are the state flower of Kentucky and Nebraska, the state wildflower of South Carolina, and the state herb of Delaware?

Yes, goldenrod is also a wild edible whose flowers and leaves may be eaten fresh or dried in teas, cooked like spinach, or added to salads, soups, stews, or casseroles.

While leading prairie walks, hikers often ask about the growths found on goldenrod stems. These galls, which are created out of plant tissue, harbor the larvae of over 50 species of insects. Often parasitized by wasps, they are also eaten by chickadees, woodpeckers, and hikers.

Over the years goldenrod has been blamed for hay fever allergies simply because it blooms at the same time as the main culprit, wind-blown ragweed pollen. In reality, goldenrod pollen is too heavy to blow in the wind and is instead carried by insects. If you look closely, you may be amazed at the number and variety of pollinators feasting at the goldenrod table.

In closing, I'd like to invite everyone to join Conservation for yet another exciting Halloween Hike on Saturday, October 20, as we travel by wagon on Three Rivers Trail. Sign up soon to reserve your spot for “Spiders on the Trail.” Who knows, maybe we'll encounter some goldenrod lighting up the spiders and webs. See you on the trail!

