

# **PLANT OF THE WEEK**

**September 18, 2009**

## **Goldenrod Solidago species**

On a beautiful sunny afternoon last week, I got out of my car just after entering the small estate of the Colonel and his wife. The sight of the Colonel wielding a machete was startling in the extreme. Dressed in khaki pants and shirt, accessorized by sturdy boots and a pith helmet, the Colonel was outfitted for battle. Rudolph would have swooned with envy at the color of the Colonel's nose, which ran almost constantly. His sharp brown eyes were a bit glassy, but still conveyed a deep sentiment.

Unfortunately this sentiment had more to do with disgruntlement than appreciation of the great outdoors. Quite the contrary as I was to learn.

"Here it is almost half past two, and you, my clinomaniac friend, are just showing up for the festivities! Where is your machete? I TOLD you on the phone that I wanted to take out this sneezeweed before it became a problem for my wife's allergies." That a real man would suffer from the seasonal sniffles was unthinkable for a chap of the Colonel's (retired from the British Army) system of order.

Just then the lovely Mrs. Colonel, whose first name is Millicent, came down the drive in their derelict Range Rover. Her smiling face reminded me why I come out to visit and do some work, both gardening and consulting for the couple.

"Oh dear. My trusty husband seems to have cut down that patch of Goldenrod that you planted last year! Well, let's drown our sorrows in a bit of Pym's Cup and discuss how to rectify the situation."

"This ambisinister gardener friend of yours actually PLANTED this!? I can't stand the sight of those jaundiced flowers, and ever since it came into bloom, why, you haven't had a moment's rest." That Colonel, he's tricky, trying to keep up the pretense of not being bothered by allergies but also not wanting to lie outright in front of his wife. Indeed, I imagine he was right: she probably had no rest because of his suffering.

"Actually, Colonel, Goldenrod is NOT the source of most people's pollen discomfort at this time of year. Although it is in bloom, the real culprit is usually ragweed, with the odd Latin name of Ambrosia. That plant over there," I pointed to a large patch of ragweed near the border with his neighbor, "is the source of the affliction."

"Why you anaclytic sangrado, you expect me to believe that you...Bah!" He threw his machete at the ground, where it stuck point down vibrating like a tuning fork.

Even for the Colonel, this outburst was extraordinary. I came to appreciate just how miserable he was.

This time of year, when the nights cool off considerably and one begins to feel the autumn creep slowly into the picture, it's easy to forget that there are quite a few plants still blooming in the landscape, including a suite of wonderful American native plants.

The genus *Solidago* has about a hundred species, mostly native to North America, but a handful being found in Eurasia, Mexico and South America. The genus name comes from the Latin word *solido*, to make whole or strengthen, referring to the plant's medicinal qualities. Quite the contrary to the Colonel's assertion, Goldenrod is a valuable tool for the herbalist.

Often seen in waste areas, along roadways, in fields that have gone fallow for too long, Goldenrod is an opportunistic colonizer. It will gladly fill in any area it's allowed to roam free in. Preferring full sun or partial shade, it will thrive in even the most compacted forbidding soils.

Depending on the species and the location and exposure, Goldenrods can bloom from August through October. What is particularly nice about the genus is that any bugs with even a remote interest in plants will be seen in and around them. Pollinators like honeybees, bumblebees and others will work them to exhaustion. Predators that eat other bugs will also then hang around, waiting for dinner to arrive.

The thermos of Pym's Cup magically appeared just as the Colonel was reaching his peak of disaffection. Quieting down just a bit, he eyed me and said, "I apologize if my lack of sleep—harrumph—has caused my temper to flare. The usual pygalgia associated with your visits seems to be flaring up even worse."

I was dumbstruck: I had never heard so much as a note of remorse, much less any words to that affect, in my years of discourse with the Colonel. Now I was truly and completely convinced of his misery.

"No harm done, Colonel. And I see the rosettes of leaves are still intact on the plants that you cut down, so despite a lessening of bloom this year, they will be back in fine shape next year..."

"Mybdelloid friend, help yourself to another cucumber sandwich and a refill of Pym's."



*A majestic stand of Goldenrod backed up by a purple-leaf Beech. Depending on the species, Goldenrods can be quite small, under a foot, to five feet or more.*



*The flowers of this species are arrayed in horizontal lines. Others bear flowers in larger upright clusters, generally yellow in color, but some orange and almost-reds can be found.*

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