

“Brown-Eyed Susan is a host plant for the Silvery Crescent.”



FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name:
Rudbeckia hirta
Common Names:
Brown-Eyed Susan
Family: Asteraceae

**Brown-Eyed Susan
Attracts Insect
Diversity**

Many refer to this plant as Black-Eyed Susan, though the color of the raised disc for which the name is given is actually brown.

The plant is rather easy to identify, and most people have some familiarity with the

pretty bloomer. For an up-close personal inspection, you might visit the Valley Morning Star, as Brown-Eyed Susans are blooming there in profusion.

“*Rudbeckia* is an American genus...several of which have found favor as garden plants.” (Howard S. Irwin, “Roadside Flowers of Texas,” 1961.) Indeed, a German website provides information on European moths which lay their eggs upon the plant, using it as larval food.

Irwin typically provides the best information I can find about how insects utilize different wildflowers: “A large variety of insects find in the disc flowers, according to their needs, nectar or pollen or both, the takers including honeybees and numerous wild bees, as well as bugs, flies, butterflies, and beetles.”

A field of Brown-Eyed Susan would seem a poor place to have a lie-down (quoting the British), with such an abundance of insects present.

The plant’s character gives additional reason to avoid close contact: roughly pubescent herbage. Various authors describe the plant as rough or bristly hairy. This quality is reflected in the scientific name; *hirta* comes from the Latin *hirtus* for the coarse, bristly hairs borne on stems and leaves.

The flowers last for several days when cut. I advise wearing gloves and cutting only from your own garden.

In this area, *Rudbeckia hirta* is occasionally encountered in the wild, typically on deep sandy soils in the eastern Rio Grande Plains and Coastal Prairies. The range of the plant includes much of the United States and the plant has been cultivated and sold in wildflower mixes here and abroad.

Leaves and stems of Brown-Eyed Susan are eaten by white-tailed deer and cattle. Rio Grande turkeys consume the seed. There have been reports of poisoning in cattle, sheep and hogs, published in 1911 and again in 1964.

Medicinal use of the plant is described by Michael Moore (“Medicinal Plants of the Mountain West” 1979). Tea is made from the aboveground parts of the plant and strained through a cloth to remove the hairs. This tea is reportedly a stimulating diuretic, with feeble cardiac stimulation. This may explain the toxicity reports. In droughty areas, livestock hardly need a diuretic.

Moore describes other interesting features of the plant. "...leaves sometimes bearing little glandular purple dots..." Glands on a plant's epidermis are often protective, containing irritating compounds which deter consumption.

Correll & Johnston describe two varieties: *pulcherrima* and *angustifolia*. "Some plants in east and southeast Texas are intermediate between the two varieties." ("Manual of the Vascular Plants of Texas," 1979.) Hybrid cultivars show much variability, especially in petal color. Some have petals of solid yellow. Others are adorned with red areas radiating from the central disc.

Rudbeckia hirta is considered to be a short-lived perennial.

On Padre Island, the bloom period extends throughout spring and summer.

Dyes of tan to yellow and gray tints may be produced from this plant. Directions for producing these and other plant dyes are found in: "Edible and Useful Plants of Texas and the Southwest" by Delena Tull (1987).

Rudbeckia hirta can be established from seed planted in early spring, though fall seeding is recommended. Poor soils and dry conditions are tolerated by the mature plants. Good drainage is required. Full sun is preferred, though light shade is tolerated. Shaded plants will become leggy.

The seed requires several days of moisture and should germinate in one to two weeks.

As with all wildflowers, it is important to avoid mowing until seed is mature, to encourage reseeding for the following year. Break open the seed cone to check seed color. Dark seeds are mature.

In some parts of the U.S., the silver crescent butterfly lays eggs upon Brown-Eyed Susan. This orange and black butterfly with white-dotted wing edges is less than two inches in width.

Many reference books were used in writing this article, far too many to name. To view field guides on Texas Wildflowers in your local library, try the "Texas" section. Books about Texas' animals and plants are typically found there, though many of us search for them in the section on "Plants," or "Birds."



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