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## Growing native plants in containers – does it work?

By Bonnie Vastag

Native plants are tough. Don't we invoke that phrase repeatedly as we promote the advantages of natural landscaping? The Green Bay Chapter had a unique opportunity to test that phrase during the summer of 2010, when we filled 11 large containers with natives.

Each Wednesday, from early June until mid October, several blocks of North Broadway, in Green Bay, are transformed into a vibrant farmers' market featuring produce, crafts, music, and food. I'd noticed that there were large terra cotta bowls filled with annuals in front of many businesses, and wondered if we could get permission to plant natives in a few of them. I also wondered if the plants could thrive in those small spaces.

In mid-May, 2010, I phoned the director of the On Broadway program, and asked if we could put native plants in some of the containers. I emphasized the planters would be lush, and that we would keep them neat and attractive. It helped when a horticulture student, assigned to On Broadway for an internship, enthusiastically described the beauty and benefits of native plants to the organization.

I dreamed of getting two or three containers, and was ecstatic when we were assigned an entire group of 11 containers. We agreed that the chapter would provide the plants for two of the large planters and one small one, and that On Broadway would purchase enough native plants to fill the remaining eight. In addition, a few plants were donated by our members. Before planting, I searched print and online sources for information on species that would do well confined to a terra cotta bowl. I found very little, but we proceeded anyway, reassuring ourselves repeatedly, "These plants are tough."



The location, on the southeast side of the street, provided many hours of sun each day, but the planters themselves posed challenges. Shallow, with room for about 18 inches of soil, they held a soilless mix, and varied in diameter, with some 40 inches and others 60 inches.

It was time to get advice from Ceci Kiefer, co-owner of Stone Silo Prairie Gardens, our major local source of native plants, and an active Wild Ones business member. She put together a list of suitable plants at a very good price, and as a bonus, included a number of plants at no charge. Molly Tomasallo, landscape architect from the Green Bay Parks Department, designed the layout. Planting day was May 27, and we finished by placing a Wild Ones sign in the center of the group. Over the summer, we checked often so we could deadhead, trim unsightly stems, remove dead leaves, and provide stakes for support. Watering was provided once a week by a landscaping business. After the first month, we stressed that these plants needed just a little water, and asked that no fertilizer be used.

How exciting it was to watch our tough plants. They grew, they bloomed, they adapted to their location. Not all species performed equally well, but most will be invited back for the summer of 2011, when we once again plant the same containers.

**The following group of forbs earned A's and B's, and will definitely be invited back for another year**

The short, early bloomers that kept providing color were dwarf penstemon (*Penstemon hirsutus*), harebell (*Campanula rotundifolia*), and big fruit primrose (*Oenothera macrocarpa*). Harebell needed constant trimming, but it kept blooming. Purple poppy mallow (*Callirhoe triangulata*), with its brilliant color and delicate stems, looked very good twining up and in between

other plants, and it never stopped blooming. Coreopsis (*Coreopsis lanceolata*) was another good early bloomer, and it rebloomed after it was cut back.

Two standouts among the taller, prolific bloomers were anise hyssop, (*Agastache foeniculum*) and oxeye sunflower (*Heliopsis helianthoides*). Both needed staking by late summer, and required trimming, especially the oxeye sunflower, but they seemed very happy in their containers and put on a great show.

**Good, solid performers that we'll use again**

Beardtongue (*Penstemon grandiflorus*). Ohio spiderwort (*Tradescantia ohiensis*) good for early color. Rattlesnake master (*Eryngium yuccifolium*) required staking, but its unusual shape added so much interest. Tennessee coneflower (*Echinacea tennesseensis*). Purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*). Pale purple coneflower (*Echinacea pallida*). Sky blue aster (*Aster azureus*) provided lateseason color, but the rest of the plants near it had spent all their energy, and it looked lonesome.

In two of the 60-inch planters, wild senna (*Cassia hebecarpa*) took center stage. It grew tall and full, and looked majestic. Even though it only bloomed a little and a few of the bottom leaves yellowed by late summer, we'll use it again.

Gray headed coneflower (*Ratibida pinnata*) poked its bright yellow blossoms through prairie dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*) and side oats grama (*Bouteloua curtipendula*), which helped hold it erect. Both of these grasses, plus prairie Junegrass (*Koeleria macrantha*) provided great texture while serving as fillers. The other grass we used was little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) a great filler, but it didn't produce seed heads, even though these were mature plants from a member's garden.





Prairie sage (*Artemisia ludoviciana*), with its silvery color, provided an accent, but it didn't bloom, most likely due to lack of sun.

#### **Seven species we won't invite back**

Monarda (*Monarda fistulosa*), showy goldenrod (*Solidago speciosa*), and blue lobelia (*Lobelia siphilitica*) sprawled ungraciously and bloomed very little. Prairie blazing star (*Liatris pycnostachya*) bloomed well, but seemed to be reaching for the sky, and didn't fit in. No blossoms appeared on white prairie clover (*Dalea candida*). Nodding onion (*Allium cernuum*) hid beneath its neighbors, and never bloomed. Wild petunia (*Ruellia humilis*) didn't bloom well, sprawled, and probably needed more sun.

We had two opportunities to have an informational table during the farmers' market. Placed directly in

front of our plants, we introduced many people to what we do, and felt we were reaching a completely new audience.

Unfortunately, On Broadway insisted that we remove all of the plants, because they planned to put Christmas decorations in the planter. So, in late October, all the plants were cut back, and we offered them to Westwood Elementary School, De Pere, one of our Seeds for Education winners.

This year, I'll make another plea to leave the plants in place at the end of the growing season. I feel they won't interfere with the seasonal decorations, and it would let us continue to test the toughness of native plants.