

Beautiful yellow or purple coneflowers have been blooming all over Louisiana. Among them are the familiar and conspicuous “black-eyed susans” that can be found along roadways across the state.

Louisiana’s coneflowers are in four genera of “composite” flowers of the sunflower family. Composites are characterized by many small disc flowers in the center surrounded by larger tongue-shaped flowers. Other composite flowers include asters, daisies and sunflowers.

Coneflower are so named because of their cone-or dome-shaped center made up of many tiny individual flowers. The center flowers are either brown, orange or dark maroon. Ray flowers can be dark red or purple, but most species’ are yellow.

Louisiana boasts three *Ratibia* species and ten *Rudbeckia* species (“black-eyed susans”). *Rudbeckia hirta* is the common black-eyed susan that can be seen everywhere along roadsides in early summer.

A third genera in Louisiana is represented by the clasping coneflower, *Dracopis amplexicaulis*. This species is as widespread as the common black-eyed susan.

There are four species of *Echinacea* in Louisiana. These are the purple coneflowers, which have pink-purple ray flowers and orange disc flowers. *Echinacea* was used by native peoples and is still used today for medicinal and herbal purposes as a heal-all. The root is known to increase the body’s resistance to infections, and from 1890 to 1930 , one species was the largest-selling and most popular drug derived from an American medicinal plant.

*Echinacea* is very popular as a perennial wildflower for gardens. Purple coneflowers attain large and long-lasting blooms and sturdy stems. They are as successful in full sun as in partial shade.

Many coneflower species can be quite tall. The group ranges from about a foot or so tall to the tremendous nine foot height of *Rudbeckia maxima*.

This group also includes some very rare plants for Louisiana besides the familiar and widespread ones. One of the rarest plant species in the state is the Sabine coneflower, *Rudbeckia scabrifolia*. The Nature Conservancy considers it “imperilled globally because of rarity.” In Louisiana, it is found only in Natchitoches, Sabine, Vernon, and Winn parishes in hillside bogs.

*Rudbeckia missouriensis*, the Missouri coneflower, is also considered rare. It is known only from the calcareous prairies of Vernon Parish. “These are calcium-rich soils which have extreme physical and chemical properties which hinder tree growth,” said Department of Wildlife Fisheries botanist Julia Larke. “Only grasses and herbs grow there.”

Another rare coneflower is *Rudbeckia triloba*, the three lobed coneflower. It lives in calcareous forests of Bossier and Natchitoches parishes. “Calcareous forest are similar to calcareous prairies but they support some tree life,” said Larke. This species also occurs in the salt-dome hardwood forest of Weeks Island in Iberia Parish.

Another rare species is the Mexican hat, *Ratibia peduncularis*, a coastal dune grassland species found in Cameron and Vermilion parish cheniers.

Larke noted that LSU botanist Lowell Urbatsch is studying this unique group of plants. He is working out relationships among various coneflower species and between coneflowers and other species using chemical taxonomic techniques. Larke’s own work takes her to plant communities where rare as well as

common species grow. Whether common or rare, these beautiful flowers can brighten anyone's day. This article was provided by the LDWF as a press release in the summer of 1996, and written by Julia Larke, Louisiana Natural Heritage botanist at that time.