

Garden Column for the Salisbury Post

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Choosing a favorite flower is like choosing a favorite ice cream flavor - challenging. Over the past few years, the coneflower has become one of my favorites.

The first coneflower I purchased was *Echinacea purpurea*. It produces many large daisy-like flowers consisting of pinkish purple petals surrounding a center cone, thus their common name, "purple coneflower". Flowers are produced on sturdy stems and are long lasting, either on the plant or as cut flowers. Bloom period is from June to frost in Rowan County. The plant has large dark green leaves and can grow to about 3 feet in height.

Since our area has seen higher summer temperatures and decreased amounts of rain over the past few years, coneflower is an ideal perennial for our garden. Planted in well-drained soils, these plants can tolerate full to partial sun. Once established they become drought tolerant.

Coneflower is also insect and disease resistant. My only insect problem has been with Japanese beetles, but they can be managed by spraying, beetle traps, or hand picking.

Butterflies are attracted to the colorful flowers and the mature seed heads are a food source for birds, especially goldfinches. I've even had a lizard that likes to lay on the leaves and sun himself. Plants are also deer resistant.

Many new varieties of coneflowers have become available in our local garden centers and through garden catalogues. Cross-breeding between traditional purple coneflower and other varieties have produced a wide range of plants with different colored petals, cone structures, colored stems, heights, and

flower petal arrangements. Some have even been bred to have a rose scent.

At present there are four types of coneflower varieties: traditional, dwarf, double-decker, and double petal. The traditional coneflower can grow to about 3 feet, with a single row of petals radiating downward from the cone. The dwarf coneflower has a height of 12-24 inches and is ideal for container plantings. The double-decker coneflower has a second layer of petals forming at the top of the cone. The double petal coneflower has tiny petals as part of the cone, in addition to the regular petals.

The biggest change to the "purple coneflower" has been the wide range of colors that are now available. Colors now include white, green, pink to magenta to red, peach to orange to russet, pale yellow to golden yellow.

Most of us do not have the space to be able to enjoy all of these beautiful varieties, so we must choose a few, at least to start. Between visiting our local garden centers and scanning catalogues, you will be able to find pictures of the new varieties, so you can decide which one you want to try.

I have chosen Harvest Moon (golden yellow), Sundown (russet orange), White Swan (white), Summer Sky (peach-pink), Kim's Knee High (dwarf pink), Pink Double Delight, and Ruby Star (reddish pink) to add to the purple coneflower already in my garden.

Hope you will enjoy a coneflower in your summer garden this year!

Lana Miller is a Master Volunteer with the Cooperative Extension in Rowan County.