

Distribute 08-24-2017

## Special Summer Blooming Plants

Despite the heat there are a number of plants that are making a great show in our landscapes. In past columns we discussed lantana, esperanza, poinciana, firebush, and thyrallis. There are more to recognize and consider for the landscape. Some of them have characteristics that make them very special.

Ceniza (Texas Sage) is a native evergreen plant that was visible all across the region blooming last week. It was the plant with the silver mouse-ear size foliage and the pink-lavender bloom. Ceniza is used as a specimen shrub and as a hedge plant. It grows to 7 feet tall and 6 feet in diameter. It can be shaped by hedging and still blooms. Grow ceniza in full sun. It is a prominent xeriscape plant. In fact, one of the only ways to kill ceniza is to over-water it. The plant won't last in low wet areas or under excessive irrigation.

The special characteristic of ceniza is that its bloom pattern is unpredictable. The story gets even better because ceniza seems to predict rainy weather by blooming before storms. Last week was an example, ceniza all over the region were blooming, apparently in anticipation of the rain last weekend.

Ceniza is readily available at area nurseries. There are a number of selections differentiated by leaf color, flower color, compactness, and final size. It is rare but if you come across a "Lynn Lowery Legacy" ceniza latch on to it. It is the ceniza growing in the Mitchell Lake Native Plant Garden. It has a bluish bloom on a large but dense plant that is especially attractive.

Sunflower is a native annual flower that grows to 7 feet tall on typically poor San Antonio area soils without irrigation. The blooms are classical yellow sunflowers that grow to about 3 inches across. Typically annual sunflower forms thickets of plants loaded with blooms that become as large as there is open space to fill.

In my yard every year we designate one or more sunflower thicket areas about 10 feet across and spread some of the seed in the area. The plants germinate in May or June to take advantage of the hottest weather of summer in July and August for their bloom. First, though, they serve as the egg-laying site for "bordered patch" butterflies. The young plants become covered with caterpillars that eat most of the foliage. Don't worry, the plants recover and produce their blooms.

In addition to attractive flowers, sunflowers are special because of their value as a wildlife food source. In addition to serving as the favored "bordered patch" egg-laying site, the blooms provide nectar to adult butterflies and seeds to our resident seed-eaters. Expect to see lesser goldfinches, cardinals, house finches, English sparrows, and Inca doves pulling seeds from the dry flower heads or picking them up on the ground. .

You can collect seeds from sunflower thickets at Mitchell Lake or other areas to create your own beds. The seeds are also for sale in packets at retail nurseries in the area or you can purchase them on the internet. There is time to plant a new bed now to produce seeds to be used by birds into the winter.

The Maximilian sunflower is just as valuable for wildlife but it is a perennial that may be harder to manage. In addition to seeds, it spreads by rhizomes!

Another special plant that is blooming now is zinnia. They are the mainstay of cut flower gardens and flower borders in full sun. Zinnias are also one of the top sources of nectar for hummingbirds and butterflies. The best place to observe hummingbirds and butterflies in a landscape is the zinnia bed. They become even more special if you use them as food sources for the same seed-eating birds that flock to the sunflowers.

To maximize the impact on seed-eating birds you may have to change some of your zinnia growing practices. Become less conscientious in your dead heading and allow some of the flower heads to brown. Two things happen when you allow the flowers to mature, the birds harvest the seed and the seed drops to provide a new crop of zinnias.

If your original planting is of a hybrid like Dreamland from transplants, the reseeded plants will represent their parentage and offer much variation. The butterflies seem to like the reseeded zinnias as a nectar source better than the original hybrids.

Another option is to obtain one or more of the many zinnia varieties available in seed packets and plant them. My favorites are Cactus and California Giant. There is still time to plant zinnias and raise a crop of flowers for cutting and attracting wildlife.