

## ***Echinacea purpurea* – A Plant of the Past and Future**

If you get the opportunity to travel through the mid-west United States, you will discover a surprising number of garden worthy plants. With the Mid-West's relentless sun, harsh drying winds, sandy soils, weeks without rain, and severe winters, it is the proving grounds for tough, low maintenance garden plants. One of the great plants heralding from this region is the Purple Cone Flower, *Echinacea purpurea* and all of its cultivars and related species.

An herbaceous plant, inferring that it dies to the ground during the winter, the plants return to life in mid-April as a basal rosette of leaves. By early July, the first pink daisy-like flowers flicker to life upon 2-3' stems. The pink floral rays (the petals) surround a very prickly orange colored cone composed of fertile flowers (called disc florets) that have no petals. It is these disc florets that produce the seeds. The prickly nature of the cone led to the botanical name *Echinacea*, derived from the Greek word for hedgehog – *echinos*! On many of the plants, the pink floral rays droop, giving the impression that the flower is just past prime (although it may have just appeared!) Twenty years ago, I found this trait unattractive. I now find it provides interest and much character to the garden. The flowers are effective until late August or early September and are the magnet for much activity in the garden. Moths, various butterflies and bees provide a whimsical ballet of flight as they go through the act of pollination! By September, the petals slowly turn brown and drop, leaving the now dark brown central cone. Throughout the fall and early winter another ballet ensues, as many a songbird (mostly Goldfinches) will perch atop the swaying cones and eat the seeds. By February, the now seedless plants can be cut to the ground, and become ready to start the process once again.

Historically, the Native American Indians used the roots and leaves to treat various health ailments. Research continues to this day to determine its effect on cold and flu symptoms, as well as its roll in treating HIV. Although the research concerning the benefits are not totally conclusive, many people are convinced that *Echinacea* pills do have a stimulating affect on the immune system.

From a garden standpoint, there are a number of excellent cultivars on the market. Plus, there have been a series of new crosses completed, adding several exciting new colors to the gardener's palette. Two of my favorite traditional cultivars include 'Magnus' and 'White Swan'. Magnus is a selection that usually comes true from seed. The flower petals are deep pink, overlap slightly, and are held out perpendicular to the flower stalk. White Swan also comes true to type from seed, and is an attractive, off-white petaled form.

Recent introductions include those by Dr. Jim Ault at the Chicago Botanic Garden who crossed the white flowered *Echinacea purpurea* 'Alba' with the yellow *Echinacea paradoxa*. The result was a number of attractive yellow to orange blooming plants, listed under the Meadowbrite series. Also new to the trade is the Big Sky series from Itsaul Nurseries in Georgia. Of similar parentage (*Echinacea purpurea* x *Echinacea paradoxa*), this series offers colors ranging from yellow to an exciting orange-red.

With all these great colors to choose from, and a bloom period of several months, the garden design options are nearly endless. The pink forms look great with Hydrangeas, Drumstick Alliums (*Allium sphaerocephalum*), Joe Pye Weed (*Eupatorium*) and a variety of grasses. The orange and yellow forms look stunning with purple foliaged plants or with the small orange flowers of *Agastache rupestris* or the orange foliage of *Carex testacea*. The key to success is to provide soil that is high in organic matter, moderate to low in fertility, and is allowed to dry out. This low maintenance, mid western plant just hates to be pampered!