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GARDENING WITH THE MASTERS | JODI MORGAN

GARDENING WITH THE MASTERS: Native Plants Support Pollinators

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North Carolina State University Extension (North Carolina Gardener's Toolbox)

{span id="docs-internal-guid-67d2a32f-7fff-dfcc-b225-fbf39956f4ea"}Little bluestem

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Pollination is essential to ecological survival and our food supply. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service website, without pollinators, humans would not survive. More than 150 food crops in the U.S. depend on pollinators, including almost all fruit and grain crops.

Pollinators, such as bees, butterflies, moths, and other insects, use native plants for more than just nectar. They rely on native plants as host plants to lay their eggs on so, when hatched, the larvae can eat the leaves of the host plant for food.

Homeowners should consider native plants when planning their landscape for several reasons. Native plants are low-maintenance and self-sustaining; they improve habitat for important pollinators and are a collective effort to replenish the landscape. The unique characteristics of each native plant add diversity to gardens by providing continued interest outside their bloom time.

Plants native to Georgia, such as little bluestem and butterfly weed, are important host plants and are a wonderful addition to a home's landscape. Pair little bluestem and the butterfly weed with other natives requiring similar planting characteristics, and like a symphony, each plant will resemble a different instrument. The combination of color, plant type, leaves, blooms, and structure contribute to a beautiful garden appearance.

Not only does it bring interest to the landscape, but little bluestem also provides habitat for several skipper species of butterflies, while the butterfly weed is a host plant to 12 different pollinators species. Each plant plays an important role in the biodiversity landscape.

Little bluestem, *Schizachyrium scoparium*, is in the Poaceae (grass family) family and there are three recognized varieties. Little Bluestem is commercially available and is a perennial warm-season grass reaching up to 4 feet tall. This grass grows in clumps with long-deep roots and, as a result, is drought resistant and prevents soil erosion. It returns yearly with little to no effort.

Little bluestem grows in a dazzling array of colors, starting with silvery blue on green stems and purplish seed heads. It maintains a striking appearance year-round and creates a stunning display during the fall and winter of copper yellow. Care for little

bluestem is low maintenance takes full sun, no fertilization is required, and grows in several soil types including Georgia red clay. Garden clean-up for this plant is once a year in the early spring.

Little bluestem adds rippling movement to your garden symphony and resembles a wave of movement with swaying tufted seed heads. Wildlife also uses this plant in the winter as a food source and habitat. The other important pollinator host plant, the butterfly weed, *Asclepias tuberosa*, is a type of milkweed. There are six species of milkweed native to Georgia and four of the six are native to Cherokee County.

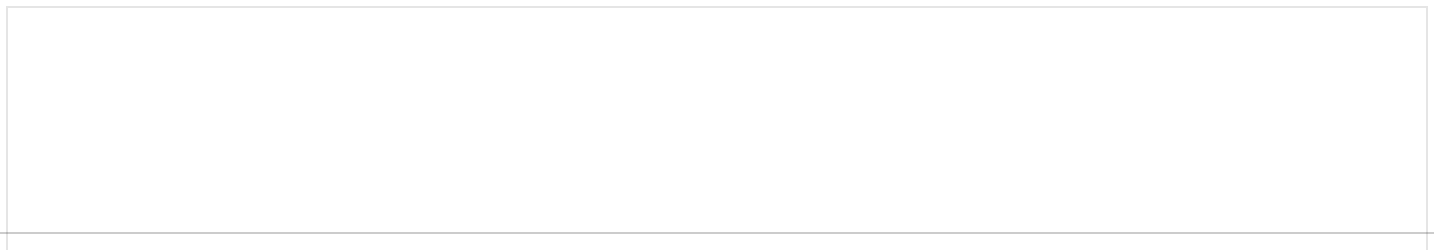
Milkweeds are perennials and part of the Apocynaceae (dogbane) family. The butterfly weed is bushy, two feet tall, and has an orange flat-top cluster of flowers. Flowers can be deadheaded mid-summer to encourage additional blooms, but even if left alone, it will bloom all summer.

Many pollinators rely on this plant for nectar. This plant is a host plant for the easily recognizable and popular monarch butterfly. It is also the host plant of queen butterflies, milkweed tussock moths, and many other pollinators. Milkweed beetles are codependent on this plant for habitat.

Butterfly weed is available commercially. While it is a prairie plant, it can be found along roadside ditches and in cultivated gardens. The good news for Cherokee County residents is that the butterfly weed is deer resistant. Happy Gardening!!

Jodi Morgan is one of many UGA Master Gardener Extension Volunteers of Cherokee County. For more information or questions contact the Cherokee County Extension Office at 770-721-7803 or for upcoming seminars follow us at www.facebook.com/cherokeemastergardeners or at cherokeemastergardeners.com.

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