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GARDENING WITH THE MASTERS: Southeastern grassland plants for the home landscape

Jodi Morgan
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Southeastern Grasslands are a declining hidden treasure across 23 Southeastern states. Southeastern grasslands are not like the American Mid-West Grasslands. Grasslands of the American South consist of nine subtypes not typically associated with being grasslands. Southeastern grasslands contain so many interesting native perennial plants beyond grasses. Some of these plants are available for purchase at local garden centers and nurseries, big box stores and online. Let's look at two plants often found in Southeastern Grasslands you can use in your home landscape.

Black-Eyed Susans



Black-Eyed Susans are in the Rudbeckia genus. The Rudbeckia genus contains 30 species of annuals, biennials and perennials. The Rudbeckia genus is part of the Asteraceae family. We are going to talk about one of the faster growing black-eyed susans Rudbeckia hirta. Rudbeckia hirta can be grown from seed or picked up as a plant at your local nursery. From seed Rudbeckia hirta sets roots, grows, and blooms in the first season planted. For this reason, this black-eyed susan is often used in meadow mixes.

Rudbeckia hirta is considered a perennial in Cherokee County. The seeds from this black-eyed susan fall and sprout easily. These plants are often used in erosion control situations. Rudbeckia hirta prefers sunshine but will grow in shade. Black-Eyed Susans are not a picky plant when considering soil. This black-eyed susan is considered a native plant in the Eastern United States. The common name, black-eyed Susan, is due to a domed black center surrounded by vivid yellow florets (like a daisy, but with yellow petals).

Rudbeckia hirta grows to between 2-3 feet tall. The leaves are about 6 inches long, stalks over 8 inches long and the flower head can have a diameter of 2 to 3 inches. A variety of birds and insects use black-eyed susans for food. American goldfinches love black-eyed susan seeds. Butterfly caterpillars using Rudbeckia hirta include gorgone checkerspot and silvery checkerspot. The Emerald Moth caterpillar uses black-eyed Susan as a host plant. A variety of bees collect nectar from black-eyed Susans.

Choosing to include *Rudbeckia hirta* in your garden will support a large variety of wildlife and insects. This plant will benefit the environment in multiple ways. The flowers are showy, wildlife and insects love this plant, and the roots help hold soil in place.

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Prairie Dropseed

Dropseed is in the *Sporobolus* genus. The *Sporobolus* genus has about 79 species. *Sporobolus* is in the Poaceae (grass) family. This genus of grasses means 'seed thrower'. We are going to focus on Prairie Dropseed — *Sporobolus heterolepis*.

Prairie Dropseed is a slow growing, short, decorative prairie grass. This grass only grows 2-4 feet tall and 2-4 feet wide. Prairie Dropseed provides erosion control due to the dense fibrous roots. The seed heads extend on two feet above the grass clump on airy arching spear. The seed heads are delicate in appearance from shades of pinks to tan. Prairie dropseed is just as interesting in the fall showing off gold tones.

Sporobolus heterolepis can be used as tall groundcover or border plants. The tufting nature of prairie dropseed resists flattening by snow and ice. The seeds drop (thus the name dropseed), and typically do not self sow. Plains Native Americans collected and ground the seeds into flour for use in cooking.

This plant feeds and shelters wildlife. Sparrow, juncos, finches, doves and other birds eat the seeds. Many skipper species use prairie dropseed as a host plant. Native bees use *Sporobolus heterolepsis* for nesting materials. Prairie dropseed prefers full sun but will tolerate periods of shade.

Sporobolus heterolepsis can grow in dry, rocky soils and heavy clay. This plant can endure drought and limited flooding. Prairie dropseed is not attractive to many insect pests. Deer ignore this plant. Prairie dropseed can be started from seed but takes a full 4 years to mature. *Sporobolus heterolepsis* is easy to find as plant plugs at online nurseries or local native plant nurseries. This plant is very low maintenance. Prairie dropseed rarely needs splitting.



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This plant has similar properties to cacti plants. The grass stores up the sun's energy during daylight until nightfall. At night, the energy is converted to stored starches. This is a native, ornamental looking type grass with many positive attributes for the home gardener.

Native grassland plants are becoming easier to find for use in the home landscape. The two plants discussed today are both low-maintenance, not picky about soil type and deer resistant. Adding native grassland plants contributes to wildlife and insect habitat and food. Consider adding native grassland plants to your landscape. 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 on Facebook at www.facebook.com/cherokeemastergardeners or cherokeemastergardeners.com.





Black-eyed Susan

Special-University of Maine Extension



Prairie Dropseed
University of Wisconsin Extension

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