Goldenrod – Scapegoat of Late Summer Allergies

There are approximately 28 species of goldenrods (Solidago spp.) in South Carolina, and they all produce masses of bright, golden flowers which light up old fields and the sides of our rural roads. Blooming typically begins in mid- to late-August and often lasts into early October. Native American’s referred to the goldenrod as “Sun Medicine” because of its bright color and medicinal qualities. The intense color of their flower pigments have long been used to dye yarn.

The appreciation for these spectacular plants has grown in recent years. In 2003 Governor Mark Sanford signed into legislation making tall goldenrod the official South Carolina state wildflower. In recent years, many new cultivars of goldenrods have appeared in the nursery trade, each with even more showy golden blooms. These combine especially well in the perennial garden with smaller cultivars of the violet, fall-blooming New England aster (Aster novae-angliae) and New York aster (A. novi-belgii), or with the blue hardy ageratum (Eupatorium coelestinum).

Unfortunately, the goldenrods share their bloom time with the inconspicuous ragweeds. It is the ragweed pollen that aggravates so many hay-fever sufferers, as ragweed pollen is wind-disseminated. Ragweeds (Ambrosia spp.) have greenish flowers on tall spikes and are not showy for attracting pollinating insects. They rely on vast amounts of pollen to be wind-blown to female flowers on nearby plants for their seed production.

Goldenrods have heavier and stickier pollen that has been well-adapted for insect pollination. The bright goldenrod flowers are quite attractive to numerous pollen gathering insects, such as bees, butterflies, wasps and beetles.
Wasp pollinating goldenrod blooms (*Solidago* sp.)
Joey Williamson, ©2013 HGIC, Clemson Extension

To better distinguish between the developing goldenrod and ragweed plants, there are major differences in plant structure, leaf shape and plant longevity. Goldenrods are perennials, which are typically single-stemmed or somewhat branched near the top of the plant, whereas ragweed plants are annuals and highly branched from the bottom upward. The Goldenrods have foliage that is not divided or dissected, as with ragweed.

Common ragweed foliage (*Ambrosia artemisiifolia*)
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There are two species of ragweed that occur in SC, common ragweed (*Ambrosia artemisiifolia*) and giant ragweed (*A. trifida*), and as the name indicates, common ragweed does appear to be the most prevalent of the two. Common ragweed has purplish branching stems and highly dissected leaves, much like the garden perennial Artemisia or wormwood. In fact the species name *artemisiifolia* means “leaves like Artemisia.” These plants grow to about 4 to 6 feet tall. The second most prevalent ragweed is giant ragweed, and its species name means that the leaves are dissected into only three parts. Giant ragweed may grow to 6 or 8 feet tall. Both ragweed species have greenish, staminate (male) flowers on spikes at the top of every branch, and each may release an abundance of wind-blown pollen.

One may wish to remove any ragweed plants on the property when their growth is first noticed and before they begin making pollen. However, be aware that ragweed plants may cause dermatitis or rash if handled without gloves. Continued mowing will also prevent the pollen-releasing flower heads from forming.

‘Fireworks’ goldenrod (*Solidago rugosa*) with sprays of flowers.
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Recently, many shorter and showier goldenrods have been bred, such as ‘Fireworks’, ‘Solar Cascade’, ‘Golden Fleece’, ‘Lynn Lowery’, and ‘Gold Rush’. Most of these are less tall and spread less aggressively than most species of goldenrod, and this makes them more adaptable within any sunny perennial garden.