BWSR FEATURED PLANT

SNEEZEWEED *Helenium autumnale*

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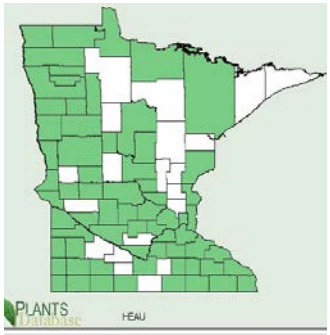
Sneezeweed is a favorite plant for lakeshore and wetland plantings, as it establishes reliably from seed, competes well with weeds, and attracts a wide range of pollinators. Blooming from August until October, the unique flowers of sneezeweed make it popular for native pollinator gardens. There is some debate about the origin of the Genus Helenium but it is likely that the name comes from the Greek word "helios" meaning sun, a reference to the flowers with round, bright yellow centers.

Sneezeweed in bloom during early September

Identification

The lance-shaped leaves of sneezeweed are toothed, alternate and vary in length from one to six inches long. When plants are not blooming they can be identified by their distinctly winged stems, a characteristic that is not common in non-woody plants. Sneezeweed grows with multiple stems in a clump that can reach 5 feet tall. The flowers bloom from August to October and have a rounded center composed of disc flowers surrounded by ray flowers that are "squared off" and have three lobes on each ray. Each flower head is on an individual stalk.

The "petal-like" ray flowers of sneezeweed each have three lobes.



Range based on University of Minnesota Herbarium data

Range

Sneezeweed is widespread across Minnesota and is also found in each of the lower 48 states and most of Canada. Its wide distribution is partly due to the plants ability to grow in a wide range of natural and disturbed riparian and wetland plant communities. Sneezeweed can grow in wet prairies, wet meadows, streambanks, fens, marsh edges, pastures, pond edges and ditches. It seems to tolerate conditions with flooding or grazing and in some cases it can be a good competitor for reed canary grass. About 40 species of Helenium are found in north and Central America with many species being adapted to more arid conditions.

Unique winged stem of sneezeweed

Uses

A wide range of insects use the nectar and pollen of sneezeweed. The species is commonly used by long-tongued bees such as honeybees, bumblebees, digger bees, cuckoo bees, and leaf-cutting bees. Other pollinators include Sphecid wasps, Vespid wasps, Syrphid flies, butterflies, and beetles (Illinois Wildflowers 2013). The species also has extensive fibrous roots that make it effective at stabilizing shorelines. The species

develops reliably from seed making it a good option for wetland restoration. The plant's height and need for support from other species can limit its use in smaller raingardens or other native gardens.

Sneezeweed was used by Native Americans and Pioneers as a snuff; the flowers were crushed and inhaled to induce sneezing to rid the body of evil spirits. Use of the plant as snuff is where it received the name sneezeweed. Its pollen is spread by insects, so it is not a common allergen. The plant was also used to treat fevers and head colds and has been shown to have anti-tumor qualities. The plant is not used by herbivores as the foliage is toxic and has been known to poison livestock. The plant is often found along waterways in pastures. As a result, conservation grazing can be used to increase abundance of sneezeweed.

Clump of sneezeweed established along open water.

Planting Recommendations

Sneezeweed has a small seed, so needs to be planted near the surface. It is often seeded with other wet meadow forbs with broadcast seeders as part of wetland restoration or riparian area seeding. The seed does not require a period of moist cold stratification like many wetland forbs and sedges, so the species can be planted in the fall or spring. The seeds are very small so they should be spread over the soil surface. The seeds of sneezeweed disperse by floating and may move from where they are spread if water levels change. If flowing water or flooding is expected in the spring it may be better to spread seed later in the spring, or to incorporate seed with a harrow or roller (or use erosion control fabric) to help keep it in place.

The seeds of sneezeweed can float, assisting their movement to conditions that are suitable for germination.

Plants are also installed from containers or in pre-vegetated mats. It is common to plant sneezeweed in lakeshore plantings from plug containers. When starting the plants in a greenhouse the seed should be spread in flats and covered with a thin layer of soil. The soil should be kept moist. Good air circulation is important to prevent molding, and shading from the sun may be beneficial as the seedlings grow. After growing a few inches tall the plants will develop sturdy stems and can be transplanted from flats to containers. The seedlings should remain in containers until they are fully rooted. When plants are installed into project sites they should be planted into moist soil and the plants should be watered until they become well established. Clumps of sneezeweed can be separated into many plants, so this can also be an effective way to increase the number of plants within a planting. It is best to divide clumps in early spring or late fall after the plant is dormant.

Additional References

Illinois Wildflowers: http://www.illinoiswildflowers.info/wetland/plants/sneezeweed.htm
UW-Steven's Point Freckman Herbarium http://wisplants.uwsp.edu/scripts/detail.asp?SpCode=HELAUTvAUT
Minnesota Wildflowers http://www.minnesotawildflowers.info/flower/sneezeweed