

Perennial beds come alive with colors and textures this time of year. There is perhaps no more striking combination than that of the coarsely textured, brightly colored coneflower paired with the delicate greens of an ornamental grass. This combination should be admired not only for its beauty, but also for its hardiness. Grasses and coneflowers thrive regardless of weather.

Through last year's drought and the deluges of this year, these combinations continue to perform with grace and beauty. Those tasked with developing and maintaining a garden of interest regardless of ever varying climatic conditions, will find ornamental grasses and coneflowers a welcome addition.

Coneflowers are one of the more striking types of perennials to fill a garden bed. Offering floriferous displays of clear white, purplish pinks and golden yellows, coneflowers can brighten even the blandest of gardens. These plants that are commonly referred to as coneflowers include Echinacea, or Purple Coneflower, Rudbeckia, or Black-Eyed Susan, and Leucanthemum, or Shasta Daisy. All are related as members of the daisy or Asteraceae family.

Echinacea, Purple Coneflower, is a stiffly textured, perennial herb, available in a range of heights from 18 to 48 inches. These perennials are prolific bloomers, with white to purple floral displays lasting from midsummer through fall. To encourage even more abundant blooming, dead head spent flowers, or take advantage of its lasting nature, and cut this flower to use for indoor displays. At season's end, allow the showy, conical seed head to remain, as they provide an excellent food source for finches and other small birds. Cut to the ground in early spring to refresh.

Echinacea is extremely tolerant of drought, and also of water, provided a well-drained soil. Additionally, it is adaptable to a pH range from 5.5 to 8.0, depending on the variety grown. For best displays of color, plant Echinacea in full sun (8 hours of sun) to partial shade (4 to 6 hours of sun). Few pests are a problem for this hardy perennial, although Japanese Beetles may occasionally feed on the leaves and petals.

Rudbeckia, commonly known as Black-Eyed Susan, is a close relative of Echinacea. This, the official State Flower of Maryland is widely recognized for its brown domed center and vibrant yellow petals. Rudbeckia provide colorful shows from midsummer through fall. Rudbeckia is an excellent cut flower, lasting six to ten days once cut.

It, like Echinacea, is a coarsely textured herb of great appeal. Available in a variety of sizes ranging from eight inches to seven feet high, there is a Rudbeckia suited for almost any garden. They prefer full sun and will thrive from neglect, even in the hottest, driest locations. While generally pest free, occasionally, in humid or wet conditions, mildew can affect leaves; provide good air circulation to minimize the occurrence.

There are both perennial and annual varieties of Rudbeckia, although the annuals reseed so readily that either type will remain a "perennial" favorite in any garden bed.

Leucanthemum, the Shasta Daisy, is a coneflower appropriate for use in shadier locations in the garden. Named for Mt. Shasta, where it was first discovered, this coneflower is a clear white with a bright yellow center. It blooms from early summer through frost.

Leucanthemum grow one to three feet tall and two feet wide. They do best in moist, well-drained soil, but will tolerate drought if planted in part shade. Dividing and pinching are required slightly more frequently with this coneflower than with its relatives Echinacea and Rudbeckia. To maintain its dense, compact and vigorous nature, divide the plant every two to three years, and pinch back any taller selections.

As like the other coneflowers, Leucanthemum makes an excellent cut flower, and this deadheading will help to promote re-bloom.

An ornamental grass planted near the striking form of one of these coneflowers will help to soften their coarse texture and will bring interest and beauty to any corner of the garden. Three excellent ornamental grasses to consider as partners to these coneflowers are Miscanthus 'Morning Light,' or Japanese Silver Grass, Pennisetum, or Fountain Grass and Chasmanthium, or Northern Sea Oats.

Miscanthus 'Morning Light' looks lovely when paired with Echinacea. This grass grows upright, then arching, to approximately four feet high and wide. It has a very fine texture to offset the coarseness of the coneflower. Its leaves are a pale green, with a narrow white stripe of variegation on the margin of the leaf. From a distance the grass appears to be silver. In late fall, a bronze flower plume appears. Grass leaves and plumes dry to a tan and last all winter until cut to the ground. To maintain winter interest, particularly against the dark brown seed heads of Echinacea, do not cut Miscanthus back until February.

Miscanthus 'Morning Light' is best grown in full sun, and will tolerate the same dry, poor soil conditions Echinacea tolerates. There are few if any insect and disease problems associated with this grass.

Rudbeckia provides an excellent display next to Pennisetum. Similar to Miscanthus in texture, this fine-leaved, arching grass is a great compliment to the stiffly upright Rudbeckia. Pennisetum is a large grass growing to 3-4' high and wide, although smaller varieties are available for more intimate garden spaces.

The blades of this grass are a bright green during summer and turn golden in the fall. A reddish flower occurs in summer and lasts into fall. These flowers typically will not hold on through the winter, but the grass's form makes it a great winter feature. It too should be cut back in February before new growth begins.

As with its partner coneflower, Pennisetum will grow best in full sun, in a well-drained soil and will have few pest problems.

To compliment Leucanthemum growing in partial shade, try planting Chasmanthium. This is a narrow, upright and somewhat arching ornamental grass that grows 2.5 to 3' tall and 12-18" wide. Chasmanthium bears dangling, dark green flowers in late summer. These later change to a beautiful reddish color in the fall and last into the winter. Even in their most mature state, the flowers of Chasmanthium make excellent cut flowers. The leaves of this grass have a bluish hue that may be darker green in deeper shade. Leaves turn bronze in the fall and add a beautiful color to the garden, particularly next to the white petals of Leucanthemum.

As with the other grasses, take advantage of the winter beauty of Chasmanthium and cut it back only in the spring.

A simple pairing of an ornamental grass with a coneflower is sure to please any gardener hoping to add a little interest to a garden. Offering multiple seasons of interest and low maintenance, this combination is guaranteed to be a success.