

HEARTLEAF ALEXANDER

By Shirley Froehlich, BSA

Everyone loves flowers. I'm sure everyone would love to have flowers blooming steadily in their garden from May 1st to September 30 if they could. Since there is no one flower that fulfills this wish, we choose the next best thing: perennials. Whether you are growing cultivated or native perennials the rules are the same. Choose an assortment of varieties that prefer similar growing conditions and that have different periods of bloom. This will make your garden exciting and interesting as the colours and textures evolve from spring through fall.

DESCRIPTION

One perennial wildflower that I often recommend for spring bloom is Heartleaf Alexander *Zizia aptera*. It blooms for about three weeks starting around the first of June. The tiny, bright yellow flowers are grouped together in a big flat cluster about 5-6 cm across (2-2 ½"). The flowers are similar to Dill but they are much brighter and showier. The finely toothed leaves are smooth and shiny, with the basal leaves being heart shaped and the upper leaves three lobed. It grows 30-60 cm tall (1-2'). Another name for the plant that you sometimes hear is Meadow Parsnip.

In addition to being a pretty wildflower Heartleaf Alexander also attracts butterflies. This member of the Parsley family is one of the host plants for the caterpillars of Black Swallowtail butterflies.

NATIVE HABITAT

In the wild Heartleaf Alexander is common in the prairies, parklands and foothills of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. It is usually found in moist meadows such as the Bradley Street Prairie in Winnipeg. It is found as far north as the southern Yukon.

There is another plant very similar to this one called Golden Alexander *Zizia aurea*. It grows in moist to wet meadows, mostly in Manitoba. It usually grows in full sun or part shade. The main difference between the two is the leaves. The Golden Alexander leaves are all three lobed with no heart shaped leaves at the base.

CULTURE

In the garden Heartleaf Alexander grows well in full sun and medium to moist soil. They will reseed themselves easily but not to the point of being a pest. Plants can be set out from May to October.

If you are starting plants from seed, it can be done in several ways. They can be direct seeded outside in October with excellent germination in spring. Just remember to keep the area moist until germination occurs if it is a dry spring. When starting either type of Alexander indoors they need to be stratified. Seed the trays, water them and store in a cold room for 6 weeks. After stratifying, place them in a room at 10-12 degrees C

(50-55 F) where germination will occur in 10-20 days. Plants started in late February will be ready to plant outdoors in June.

Heartleaf Alexander is good in combination with other native perennials such as Northern Bedstraw, Wild Bergamot, Stiff Goldenrod, Meadow Blazing Star, Smooth Aster, June Grass or Awned Wheatgrass and Big or Little Bluestem. This combination gives a constantly changing tapestry of colour and texture throughout the season.

Everyone loves beautiful flowers. However it is nice to plant flowers that do more than just beautify our gardens. If we can also provide food for birds and butterflies, help preserve our disappearing native plants, and diversify our landscapes at the same time, then our gardens will be even better.

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