

## Pollinator Partnership Spotlight

# Plant Profile: Yellow Coneflower (*Ratibida pinnata*)

By Laura Jach Smith

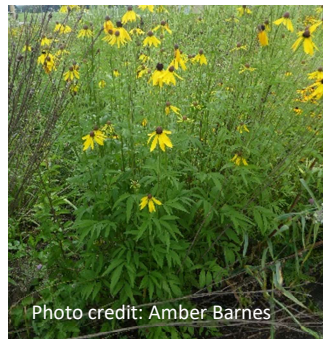


Yellow coneflower (commonly called grey-headed coneflower) is a native, herbaceous perennial that grows 3-5 feet tall with bright yellow blooms from July through September. It grows well in mesic to dry soil moisture conditions, and it tolerates periods of drought, flooding and disturbance. Being a short-lived perennial, it is common in the early-successional phase of prairie plantings, often following right on the heels of Black-eyed Susan dominance. Yet, surprisingly, it can be found still in remnant prairies, occupying

the disturbed edges of forests, agricultural fields and railroads. It is a very easy-to-grow species, and has even been known to grow from seed thrown upon a burned cool-season grass pasture.

The leaves are very distinguishing, and this plant can be easily identified even in the vegetative state. The complex lobed structure of its basal leaves is unique – alternate, and irregularly shaped with 3-7 lobes, sometimes with sparse toothed edges.

Stems are long, slender, and slightly ridged, and the flowers sit far above with drooping yellow florets, or outer petals. The drooping nature of the yellow petals is another give-away for species ID compared to the many other yellow blooms in from mid-late summer.



A common look-a-like is Black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*), but the leaves, stems, and height are entirely different (*R. hirta* is shorter, has lanceolate leaves and stems that are very fuzzy). Cutleaf coneflower (*Rudbeckia laciniata*) is another common look-a-like, but *R. pinnata* has the drooping ray floret, and more lobes in the compound structure of the basal leaves.



The flower heads start out a greenish-grey, and then turn to a brown disk floret when the yellow petals lengthen. In winter, the seed heads are still identifiable, often standing tallest in the prairie. (Photos: Yellow coneflower getting ready to bloom (top left), compound floret disc in bloom (top right), standing seed heads in winter (bottom photos. Photo credits Laura Jach-Smith).

Yellow coneflowers are a favorite of many native bees, small butterflies, beetles, flies and wasps. It is the larval host to the silvery checkerspot butterfly, wavy-line emerald moth, and the common eupithecia moth.



Silvery checkerspot butterfly  
Photo credit: Kate Redmond

For any questions or conversation, please reach out! Email [ljs@pollinator.org](mailto:ljs@pollinator.org). Let me know what pollinator related resources would help support your work and help you promote NRCS pollinator conservation practices for landowners.