

Plant More Natives!

By Susan Camp

The Gloucester Extension Master Gardeners' Annual Plant Extravaganza, held last Friday and Saturday, was a success because of the hard work and long hours contributed by Master Gardeners, interns, and trainees, but especially because of the leadership of Bob Beyea, who has held this tough job for the last eight years. I think Bob deserves a rest. Master Gardener Coordinator Rose Sullivan, the hardest-working person I know, put in an uncountable number of hours, making sure that plant labels were accurate and all of the plants were placed in the proper category. Our earnings from the Plant Extravaganza allow us to present two \$1000 scholarships annually to Gloucester High School seniors and five \$100 4-H Camp scholarships for young people.

This was our 23rd Plant Extravaganza. My first experience was in 2012, and our selection of plants was very different from this year's. We were just beginning to use the term "native plants," which we commonly referred to as "wildflowers" or "weeds," and we were just learning about "invasives." We sold the common garden plants that our mothers and grandmothers had planted, many of which had originated in Europe or Asia. Even then, we didn't sell too many invasives like English ivy (*Helix hedera*) or creeping liriopse (*Liriope spicata*), but I'm sure an occasional undesirable would slip past the eagle eyes of the Master Gardeners.

In 2025, the Plant Extravaganza inventory included an extensive variety of native plants and a smaller selection of exotics. Some customers are concerned that their beds and borders will end up looking weedy and unkempt, and that is a real possibility at summer's end, depending on which species you choose to plant. The flowers of many perennials dry up and go to seed and the stalks turn brown and leggy. Birds consume the seeds of perennials like *Rudbeckia* and *Echinacea*, and many beneficial insects lay their eggs in the hollow, drying stalks for protection from harsh winter weather until they hatch in the spring.

Let me introduce you to two native plants that remain attractive throughout the seasons. Both bear flowers in the lavender to purple range, but here the similarity ends.

Stokes aster (*Stokesia laevis*) is a low-growing, herbaceous perennial in the daisy family and is native to the Southeastern United States. It is found naturally in wetlands, pine woods, and bottomlands of coastal regions, but will readily adapt to a garden bed or border in a cottage or pollinator garden. It is evergreen in a warm environment.

Stokes aster grows best in moist, sandy soils with good drainage and a pH in the acid to normal range. It is heat and drought tolerant. It is also rabbit resistant and moderately deer resistant. There are no serious disease or insect pest problems. Bees, butterflies, and other pollinators love Stokes aster.

Stokes aster reaches 1 to 2 feet in height and 1 to 1 ½ feet in width at maturity. It consists of a basal rosette of lance-shaped, medium-green leaves. Firm, erect stalks with small, stemless leaves arise from the rosette, bearing white to pale lavender to deep cornflower blue blossoms with notched rays and a center of tiny florets from May to July. Cut the stems back to the center to encourage reblooming.

Southern blue flag iris (*Iris virginica*) is native to wetlands, pond and stream margins, and other wet, boggy areas of acidic sandy or humusy soil. It may not survive in a garden environment unless the soil is kept very moist. It prefers full sun. There are no disease or insect problems, and blue flag iris is deer resistant

Blue flag iris reaches a height of 1 to 3 feet, occasionally taller, with a similar spread. The sword-shaped leaves are bright green and may flop over. The dainty, pale blue to deep violet flowers bloom in June. The falls have a yellow crest on a white background.

Read about these lovely perennials in the NCState Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox.