

St. John's Wort, a Sunny Perennial

By Susan Camp

After spending five pleasant days with comfortable outdoor temperatures on the beautiful Virginia Tech campus at Master Gardener College, several Gloucester Extension Master Gardeners and I returned to sweltering Tidewater heat and a welcome-home thunderstorm of epic proportions. Fortunately, Jim and I experienced no damage or power loss, but I understand that many other Middle Peninsula residents did not escape the storm's wrath so easily. I will write about some of the interesting classes I attended at Tech in the near future.

Last Friday night, June 20th, heralded the Summer Solstice for those of us in the Eastern Daylight Time zone. Jim and I celebrated that long evening in the gazebo with our son, Joe, who returned that day from a year-long Coast Guard assignment overseas.

As I write this column, Tuesday, June 24th, known as Midsummer or St. John's Day, is approaching. The celebration of Midsummer, a fire and fertility festival at the midpoint of the harvest, dates back to pre-Christian times in Europe. With the introduction of Christianity, Midsummer became St. John's Day, in celebration of the saint's birthday.

What better time to talk about a cheerful plant named for the beloved saint than the week of his birthday? St. John's wort (*Hypericum*) consists of 400-500 species, cultivars, and hybrids found almost worldwide. The term "wort" is from an Anglo-Saxon word meaning plant or herb, especially one having medicinal properties. St. John's wort has been known for its wound healing and depression-lifting properties for centuries. Self-medication with this plant is not recommended. Contact your physician for medical information.

Numerous species of St. John's wort are native to North America. See the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center website for information regarding native St. John's wort species, several of which are invasive in the Pacific Northwest, the Mountain states, and the Midwest. The deciduous, perennial herbaceous shrubs grow well in USDA Zones 3 through 9.

Almost all species of St. John's wort are known for their sunny yellow or light orange flowers that bloom from June to September. The cheerful flowers are set among dark blue-green, lance-shaped leaves and reddish, twig-like stems. Copper-brown berries develop in the fall. In warm climates, the leaves may remain green throughout the winter. The average size for St. John's wort ranges from 1 to 4 feet in height and 1 to 3 feet in width depending on species.

Hypericum spp. not only provide color, but also serve as food source and shelter, particularly for pollinators and birds. Rabbits and deer rarely eat *Hypericum*, so it is a good choice to plant where these critters are plentiful. All parts of St. John's wort are toxic to humans, dogs, cats, and horses. Wear gloves when planting or pruning St. John's wort.

St. John's wort isn't too fussy about where it will grow. It prefers average, moist well-drained soil in full sun, but may require part or dappled shade in warmer climates, especially in high

summer. It flowers best in full sun, so there may be a trade-off to protect the foliage from curling and burning. The shrub needs regular watering after planting, but is drought tolerant once established, and also tolerates sandy or clayey soils. Soil pH can range from acidic to neutral to alkaline. St. John's wort benefits from the addition of compost in the spring and fall.

Few insects and diseases affect St. John's wort, but too much water can cause root rot. In winter, as temperatures drop below 40°F, root rot can occur if you continue to water the plant.

Branch tips may die in winter, but St. John's wort blooms on new wood, so prune the dead tips back to new growth. After several years, you can renew and reshape your St. John's wort by shearing the branches back by one-third to one-half its height.

See Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Finder and NCSU Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox for information about numerous species and cultivars of *Hypericum*, both native and non-native.