

Echinacea (Coneflower)

History

The name “echinacea” comes from the Latin word *echinos*, which means “porcupine.” It is native to the North American prairies and was used by the Plains Indians for a variety of purposes, including snakebite and fever relief. From 1887, echinacea was incorporated into a variety of patent medicines; by the 1920s it was the most common ingredient in patent medicines in North America. From 1916 to 1950, it was included in the National Formulary of the United States, but the use of echinacea declined in the 1930s after years of debate about its effectiveness.

Description

Echinacea belongs to the daisy family and may have simple or branched stems. The flowers look like daisies and are known as coneflowers because of the high cone in the middle of florets in purple, white, pink or magenta. Echinacea has a faint, aromatic smell and leaves a tingling sensation in the mouth. An excellent perennial, echinacea was the winner of the Perennial Plant of the Year in 1998.

The seed-headed centre can grow to be about the size of a child’s fist, and the petals are about the 2½ -3" long. Echinacea is very popular for attracting butterflies and birds to give some beauty to any garden. It has rough, hairy stems and leaves, and the leaf span is about 5" long.

Cultivation

Echinacea is a tough, tolerant plant with strong stems and is, therefore, very wind tolerant. It is also drought tolerant, but for best results it should be well watered. It grows best deep in a well-drained, humus-rich, soil. It is also light tolerant, which means that it can grow in full sun but can also tolerate shade. Echinacea can be left alone to grow, but if fertilizer is needed, a 5-10-5 granular fertilizer should be used only once, in spring. Too much fertilizing will result in plants that are top heavy and brittle.

Pests and Diseases

There are not many serious pests on the echinacea, the most serious being leaf miners. Also powdery mildew, bacterial spots and grey mould can be found on the flower. In-ground vine weevils may attack and weaken roots.

Uses

Echinacea is one of the world’s most important medicinal herbs and is extremely popular to boost the immune system and fight infections. It is traditionally used to cure colds, coughs, flu, respiratory problems, sore throat and psoriasis.

It is also commonly used for a perennial border, in a beautiful butterfly garden or in a cut-flower bouquet because of its long stem.

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