

## In the Yard: *Verbesina encelioides* (Cowpen Daisy)

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When I first started gardening two years ago, I never put much thought into planting annual plants in my yard. Not to say that the colorful array of annual flowers like marigolds, pansies, and mums never caught my eye, but the thought of having to replace annuals after a season or two did not appeal to me. I wanted to brighten up the yard with attractive foliage and blooms that would last a few years.

Even as my interest in gardening began to focus on native plants, thanks in part to groups like Texas Master Naturalist and Native Plant Project, I was still hesitant on the idea of growing annual natives for the same reasons. I asked myself as a novice gardener: How much added value did they provide alongside perennials in supporting local wildlife? How long after maturing would they be beneficial for pollinators before they die back?

I happened to pick up some seeds at the first Native Plant Project meeting that I attended in September of last year – the seeds were provided by the speaker of the night, John Brush, an urban ecologist. The seed packets were labeled “Cowpen Daisy.” Although an annual, I decided to plant some anyway. The following week, I scattered the seeds in the yard. They germinated within a few days and were surprisingly easy to tend. By springtime, the plants were already a foot tall and blooming.



For the next few months, I would be amazed at how many distinct species used the plants for various means. The first memorable sight was a Southern skipperling feeding on the rich nectar, its colors complimenting the bright yellow flowers.

Not long after, the City Nature Challenge made a perfect opportunity for me to document the varied species. While I made these observations on a single night during the challenge, I was not disappointed. The flowers had attracted small green aphids and white mealybugs, which in turn attracted spotless lady beetles. Shiny acrobat ants were moving up and down the plant. On the leaves were a leafhopper, a midge, and a garden ghost spider – all pale green, camouflaging with the leaves. Munching on the leaves were black bristled leopard moth caterpillars. Brown anoles

rested on the leaves here and there. The assortment of species interacting with each other and with the host plants was fascinating.



As spring progressed into summer, there was less activity in the yard. Despite the cowpen daisies blooming all summer, the leopard moth caterpillars were the only observation for a while. They would come out only at night to feed – during the day they curled up under logs. In mid-June, I was surprised to find another kind of caterpillar. I was very intrigued, realizing I had not seen this caterpillar species before. Soon I found another one, then another one! Before long, I realized there were several large clusters.

I searched online: *cowpen daisy host plant for what butterfly?* I took some photos and uploaded to iNaturalist for identification. Both answers were the same...the bordered patch butterfly! I would eventually see an adult butterfly flying around in the area, confirming the caterpillar specie. I counted more than fifty bordered patch caterpillars, all with a ravenous appetite. For the next few days, I watched as the caterpillars left only a meager skeleton-like structure of the plant. They eventually dispersed a week or so later.

I did not see much activity in the yard again until late August. This gave time for the plant laid barren by the bordered patch caterpillars to recover, and for me to collect seeds. A few pollinators came during the late afternoon, like mournful duskywing, a small butterfly *Burnsius orcynoides*, and keyhole wasps. While the anticipation of next season was there, the end of summer was in name only – at least for a given time.



The start of fall proved somewhat slow in butterfly action – something noted nation-wide. Drought likely played a major role in the decreased sighting of species, given that heat waves brought abnormally high temperatures well into October. A strong cold front was the key to breaking the summer-deadlock later that month. Just in time for Native Plant Week too! I documented more species this time, including a fatal metalmark.



Recent rains and fair weather have brought more pollinators into the yard, including variegated fritillary, white peacocks, queens, fiery skippers, and scrub hairstreaks. The bees are working hard too as they pollinate the cowpen daisies from morning to dusk, their little bodies covered in fine-powdery pollen.

The seeds produced from this year's growth have now fallen to the ground and germinated; the seedlings are pushing up out of the moist soil to reach for the sunlight. With the change in weather, I have also seeded other annuals like the American basket flower and partridge pea.

My views on annual plants have been reshaped for the better. Annuals, I have learned, are no less valuable than perennial plants. Cowpen daisy proved to be the golden-standard for annual native plants; germination was easy, and their many seeds produced throughout the year ensured their survival through the next generation – new plants with fresh blooms can be expected next springtime so that the rhythm of nature never skips a beat. With cowpen daisy rich in nectar, pollinators will find an oasis in the yard during any season.

I hope my experience is an encouragement for others, especially those starting native plant gardens, to add a few annual species alongside their perennial natives. Finding nature in the everyday can start in the yard, and it can start with introducing even the simplest of an annual native like the cowpen daisy.