

Gayfeather

By Kim Smith

There is a plant I've been meaning to tell you about for quite some time. Perhaps you've heard of *Liatris ligulistylus*; gayfeather and meadow blazingstar are two of its more widely known common names. We like the name gayfeather; it just sounds jubilant, as a flower that butterflies find appealing should. I only learned of its Monarch-attracting potency several years ago when inquiring about an entirely different plant from the proprietor of a nursery in Kansas. When she learned of my search for butterfly attractants, she asked whether I knew of *Liatris*. As ours only attracts a few sweet little skippers each season, my reply was less than enthusiastic about its purported capabilities. She suggested you must have *Liatris spicata*, not *Liatris ligulistylus*. True, that was the case. I placed an order for her liatris, several, as is my habit when testing a new plant for the pollinators. It doesn't seem fair to experiment with merely one, with a few we can try different locations in the garden. For example, we planted one gayfeather in full sun and another, part shade. More than several would be a waste of money, especially when it is not native to our specific region, and we run the risk of unreliable cold-hardiness.

Liatris ligulistylus (pronounced lye-AT-riss lig-yoo-lis-STY-lis) is a member of the Asteraceae and indigenous to the central U.S and Canada, found from Nevada to Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. The pompom-like lavender-pink flower heads open from tightly wrapped magenta buds along the length of three- to four-foot slender stalks. And yes, I am happy to report, it is a beacon for the Monarchs. Plants sited in full sun bloom earlier, say mid-July, while plants sited in part shade bloom a little later, extending the season for well over a month. Woven throughout the garden tapestry, gayfeather blends exuberantly with native North American Lepidoptera attractants such as coneflowers, marsh milkweed, common milkweed, *Phlox davidii*, whirling butterflies, cosmos, zinnias, *Rudbeckia* 'Autumn Sun,' and *Penstemon* 'Husker Red.'

On a recent trip to New England Wildflower Society's Garden in the Woods, I was conversing with the horticulturist Nicola Cataldo when she asked if I knew of the power of *Liatris ligulistylus*. She shared that when the plants arrive from propagating fields, seemingly every Monarch in the garden is immediately present; before the staff has finished unloading gayfeather from the truck, the Monarchs are imbibing!

Speaking of New England Wild Flower Society, I'm on my way out the door to purchase several 'Major Wheeler' trumpet honeysuckles (*Lonicera sempervirens*). We've been very pleased with the success of brilliant 'Dropmore Scarlet' (*Lonicera x brownii*) and cadmium yellow 'John Clayton,' both cultivars of the native *Lonicera sempervirens*, and both wildly attractive to the Ruby-throated hummingbirds. We are always looking to create vertical layers in our postage stamp of a garden. The possibilities are seemingly endless, and usually successful; however, this past season we tried 'Mandarin' and I am not pleased as the foliage looked ratty all summer. Foliage often looks poor initially after transplanting, so we will give it one more year in the garden.

'Major Wheeler' flowers the earliest of the trumpet honeysuckles, with redder blossoms than the orangey-red of 'Dropmore Scarlet.' Early blooms are an important feature for a trumpet vine planted to lure hummingbirds. You want to provide red to orange tubular-shaped flowers and have your hummingbird feeders hung and ready for the first of the northward migrating scouts. If nothing is available, they will pass by your garden and none will take residence. Hummingbirds can easily distinguish red contrasting against green. We go so far as to plant vivid

Red Riding Hood tulips beneath the hummingbird feeders, which hang from the bows of the flowering fruit trees. Although hummingbirds do not nectar from tulips, the color red draws them into the garden and the flowering fruit trees and sugar water provide sustenance for travel-weary migrants. The past three summers we have been graced with a single mama hummingbird residing in our garden. Mid-morning, noon and dusk finds her making rounds through the garden, nectaring always first at the trumpet honeysuckles, on to the cardinal climber, and then the bougainvillea, investigating whatever else is red, orange, and/or tubular. One sunny morning, my husband found her wedged between two panes of glass of the kitchen window embowered with the bougainvillea of which she is so fond. A wee creature, with sharply elongated bill designed for tubular trumpets, we gently (and gingerly) scooped her out. Fortunately, she wasn't too terrified of the giant human hands descending to rescue her. The very next day we caught a glimpse of her cavorting in the spray of water made by the garden hose.

Red Riding Hood tulips are hardy and naturalize readily, and are available from John Messelar Bulb Co. *Liatris ligulistylus* and *Lonicera sempervirens* 'Major Wheeler' are available at NEWFS Garden in the Woods.

Kim Smith is an interior and garden designer. Preorders for her forthcoming book *Oh Garden of Fresh Possibilities! ~ Notes from a Gloucester Garden*, November 2008, are available through her website at www.kimsmithdesigns.com and Toad Hall Bookstore at www.toadhallbooks.org. Kim will be happy to respond to readers' questions and comments at kimsmithdesigns@hotmail.com.



Liatris ligulistylus and Monarch Butterfly

