



Photo by David Whelan

Plants for Birds: **Prairie Coneflower** (Mexican Hat)

- **Scientific Name:** *Ratibida columnifera* (Asteraceae Family)
- **Height:** 18 inches to 3 feet
- **Hardiness:** Zone 4
- **Wildlife Value:** Provides seeds/cover for birds; attracts pollinators

Prairie coneflower is a native herbaceous perennial that makes a wonderful addition to a low-maintenance, bird-friendly garden. Its delightful blossoms, with their downward sweeping petals, have a tall center cone that becomes packed with seeds in the fall, providing food for seed-eating birds such as finches and sparrows. The ray flowers attract and feed bees and butterflies. This plant is also known as a xeric or waterwise plant, is fast growing, is easy to grow from seed, and makes a lovely display in the garden.

A drought-tolerant native, prairie coneflower prefers dry open grassland sites, meadows, pastures, and mountain foothills but is also found along roadsides and in disturbed areas. It readily establishes itself and is a good re-seeder—thus its use in the restoration of waste or damaged landscapes.

This plant flowers in July and August with seeds ripening in September. It produces bright yellow ray flowers which can also be streaked reddish brown or be completely red-brown. The sombrero-shaped flower heads grow 3–7 per stalk while the stalk itself can grow from 1.5–3 feet tall. Growing well in various soil types, from loamy to sandy-gravelly, prairie coneflower prefers un-amended, well-drained soils and needs full hot sun to thrive.

Prairie coneflower is easy to get started in the garden either by seed or by plants available at the local nurseries. Seeds can be broadcast in fall or spring but won't produce flowers until the second year. It's very hardy and once established can aggressively reseed itself. Don't be in a hurry to cut this flower down after it is done blooming. Allow the seed heads to ripen and remain standing to provide food for the birds over the long winter months. You will be putting out the welcome mat for American Goldfinch, Pine Siskins, and White-crowned Sparrows!

