

Golden Crownbeard

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Golden crownbeard is an annual forb that grows from a taproot with stem that is single or branching near the base, becoming much branched in the upper part. The foliage is grayish to blue green, with plants reaching 3 or 4 feet tall and often 3 feet across. Leaves are simple, mostly opposite but with upper leaves alternate, with fine silky hair giving plant its grayish color. The margins of the leaves are coarsely toothed, up to 4 inches long, roughly triangular in shape and heavily veined underneath. Leaf stalks (petioles) have narrow wings running from leaf to stem. Numerous yellow flower heads form on terminal stalks about 1½-inch across, usually with 12 rays, each three-lobed on tips, blooming from spring to fall. Fruit is a flattened seed with wings and two stiff teeth or awns on end.

Golden crownbeard, *Verbesina encelioides*, may also be known in your area as cowpen daisy, skunk-daisy or even stinking sunflower. The entire plant has a very disagreeable odor when disturbed. Golden crownbeard can be found growing in all vegetational regions of Texas with heaviest concentrations found in those counties west of Interstate 35. It is particularly common in the counties with sandy soils but can grow in all soil types. The great American poet, Ralph Waldo Emerson once stated, "A weed is a plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered." Golden crownbeard certainly fits into this definition of a weed. The reason it is often called cowpen daisy is for its tendency to grow in less used areas. Golden crownbeard is frequently found around corrals, disturbed areas, on old field edges, roadsides and dry creek banks. Livestock do not utilize golden crownbeard, but deer and antelope will eat the young tender leaves as fair forage. Quail, dove and songbirds use the seeds, and many pollinators visit this plant. And it is this use by pollinators that is the most exciting news.

Since the mature plants, including those actively producing flowers are not eaten by livestock, wildlife or even a hungry horse, they are readily available for use by many species of pollinators. Since one out of every three bites of food come to us courtesy of the efforts of pollinators, flowering plants are needed to support the pollinators. And therein lies the true value of golden crownbeard, we have discovered the virtue Ralph Waldo recognized back in the 1800's. As long as there is adequate soil moisture, golden crownbeard will be one of the first to flower in the spring and one of the last in the fall. Pollinators are active during the spring, summer and fall and that is when they most need flowering plants used for nectar and pollen.

Golden crownbeard is normally not cultivated or encouraged for its food value but if you need additional flowering plants during the heat of summer or late in the fall, then scatter some seeds of this plant. The plants will grow and produce an unlimited number of seeds so you will not have to reseed in the same area. Being an abundant producer of seeds is one of the traits of what some call a weed.

In mid-September 2018 I was on a ranch in Mills County to assist with a spotlight deer count as we have done for 10 years. I drove the spotlight route mid-afternoon to check the road for washouts or other obstacles. Sadly, oak wilt has killed many hundreds of live oak and Spanish oak trees on this ranch. I passed a live oak motte about 100 yards in length and noticed that about a fourth of the long motte had died. What was surprising was that golden crownbeard was now growing under the dead branches. There had been no ground disturbance since the dead trees were still standing.

The seeds must have already been in the soil waiting for a chance to grow, now that moisture and sunlight were available the seeds germinated and had grown into a thick stand of golden crownbeard in full flower. There were no crownbeard plants growing under the living live oaks in the remainder of the motte. As I was taking photos several Monarch and Queen butterflies flittered around from flower to flower. This was during the fall migration of the Monarchs who were very appreciative of the numerous yellow flower heads. When driving on fumes in an empty gas tank we have all gazed down the road hoping for a gas station, these yellow flower heads reflecting the autumn sunshine back up to the Monarchs must have looked like a gas station to a weary traveler. As a side note that same location in August of 2019 revealed only a few surviving crownbeard plants owing to the hot, dry summer. However, the seeds of golden crownbeard will lie dormant in the soil, waiting for another favorable growing season.

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Photo Captions:

1 View of a young Golden crownbeard plant during the early summer months.



2 Mid summer flowers provide nectar and pollen for pollinators.



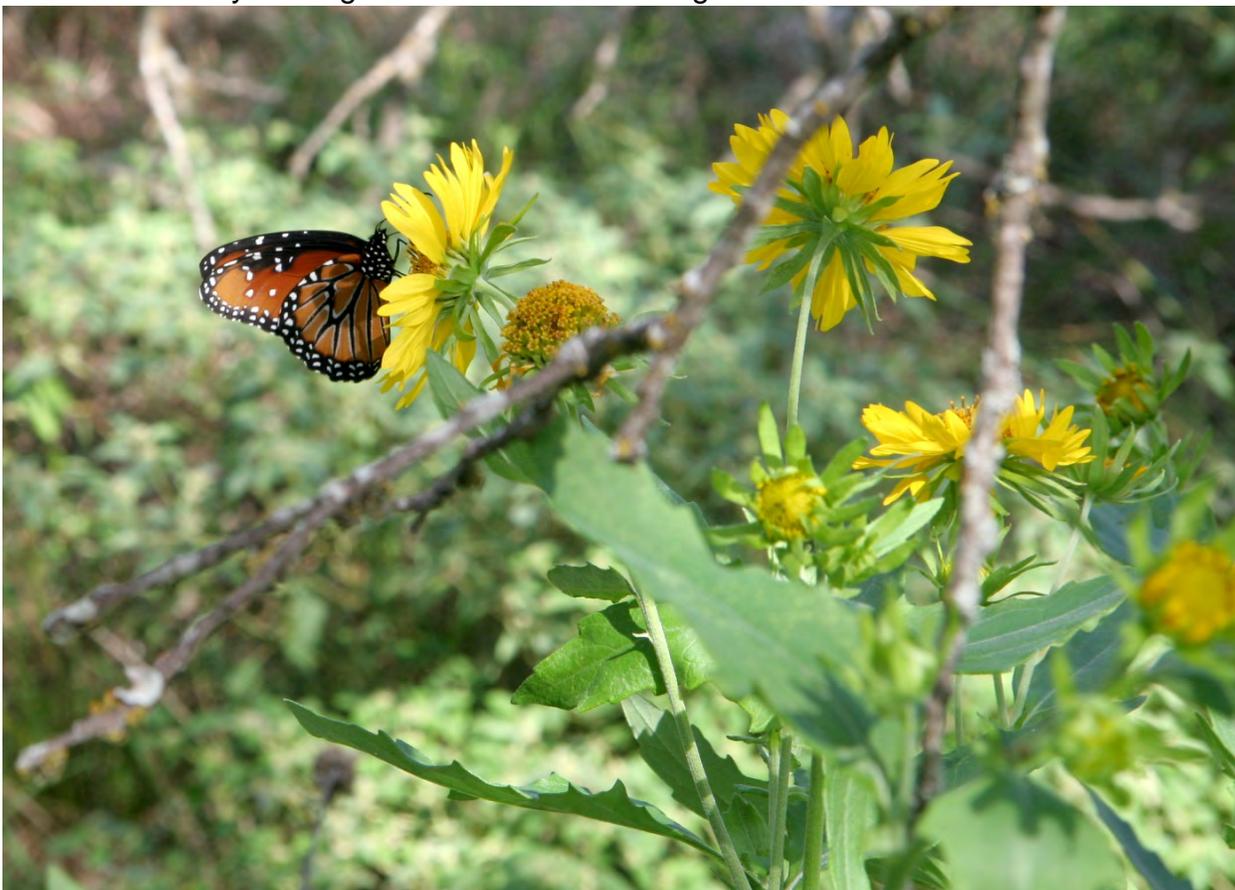
3 Prominent veins on underside of toothed leaves with lobes or wings on lower part of leaf.



4 Lush growth of golden crownbeard under dead oaks taking advantage of soil moisture and sunlight in mid-September 2018.



5 Queen butterfly looking for nectar to fuel the migration to Central America.



6 Golden crownbeard still flowering in mid-October in the Rolling Plains of Texas.



7 One-quarter inch long seeds of Golden crownbeard show the papery wings and stiff awns



