

## GROW WITH EXTENSION



Rattlesnake Master. [CONTRIBUTED PHOTO]

## The Rattlesnake Master



Amy Mead

This summer at the N.C. Cooperative Extension, New Hanover County Center at the Arboretum you can view a beautiful example of a prairie style garden blanketed with swaths of natives and native cultivars. The Storm Water Infiltration Zone, designed to manage storm water runoff from our rooftops and parking lot, is in full bloom with easily recognizable plants such as coneflower, butterfly weed, and pink muhly grass. Amongst these odd better known cultivars, there is one eye-catching patch of plants with tall, spiky, globe shaped, greenish-white flowers that you may not be familiar with: The Rattlesnake Master (*Eryngium yuccifolium*).

I'll admit that I was a little skeptical of this plant when I first saw it. It does not conform to the generic, tidy shapes of plants that we are used to seeing cultivated by nurseries. When not in bloom, the plant forms a crown of long, narrow, fibrous leaves. The species name *yuccifolium*, meaning "yucca-like leaves", gives you a clue about the look of the plant. The plant does

indeed resemble Yucca, but there is no botanical relation. Rattlesnake Master is actually a member of Apiaceae, the parsley and carrot family. Crush a leaf and you can easily smell the scent of carrots.

Rattlesnake Master flowers in the summertime starting in June and may continue through September. The curious flowers sit atop 3-4' tall, thin, branching stalks and provide eye-catching shape and texture to the landscape. I've seen the blooms described as "fuzzy disco balls". These little disco ball flower heads, upwards of 20 per plant, are packed with tiny inconspicuous flowers. Planted in groupings, the flowers make a striking display.

The odd name "Rattlesnake Master" may have come from the purported medical uses of the plant. One of the first descriptions of this plant is from the 1700's by John Adair. He described the use of the plant's sap to prevent snake bites during Native American ceremonies involving the handling of snakes. Adair reported to have seen Native Americans chewing the root of the plant, blowing on their hands and then handling rattlesnakes with no harm. In case you were thinking of using this plant the next time you encounter a rattlesnake, please reconsider. There is no evidence that this plant is an effective preventative or treatment against snake venom. The

plant was also apparently used as a medicinal treatment for worms, as an emetic, or to treat liver problems.

While not used for any medicinal purposes in present day, the Rattlesnake Master is gaining in popularity as an ornamental native plant. Reintroducing native plants to our coastal landscapes serves many purposes. Many species of wildlife depend upon native plants for food or shelter. In addition, native plants are generally well adapted to the temperatures, precipitation, and soils in our region and will therefore require less inputs of fertilizer and irrigation. The Rattlesnake Master, like many native plants, is incredibly well adapted to living in hot, dry climates. A long, stout taproot allows the plant to store water and survive summer droughts. In the garden, the Rattlesnake Master is a favorite of our native insects. The plant will attract Monarchs butterflies, skippers, and other butterflies for nectar and a variety of bees, wasps and other pollinators feed on the pollen.

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