

GROW WITH EXTENSION

Extension Master Gardeners donate plants for Cape Fear Museum garden



Blanket Flowers, donated by the Extension Master Gardeners, add color to the Cape Fear Museum garden.
[CONTRIBUTED PHOTO]

By Lloyd Singleton

A blanket of flowers sounds idyllic to me. Colorful, welcoming, a graceful adornment; good descriptors of *gaillardia pulchella*, otherwise known as Indian Blanket Flower. These flowers in bold colors representative of those often used in native American weaving are prolific on the barrier islands and will grow in the soft sand along beach walkways. They are highly drought and salt tolerant.

This sturdy North American native forms attractive rounded clumps of up to two-foot tall of soft, hairy, leaves and single, semidouble, or double flowers held on long stems above the foliage. Appearing throughout the warm season, the two- to three-inch-wide flowers are available in yellow, orange, red, or bicolors, and make excellent, long-lasting cut flowers. Deadheading helps extend the bloom season. The daisy-like blossoms are quite attractive to butterflies; these annual flowers will normally reseed themselves quite readily.

Gaillardia x grandiflora is also known as blanket flower, and is a hybrid of the perennial *gaillardia* (*G. aristata*) and the annual *gaillardia* mentioned previously. A short-lived perennial, there are several cultivars available to extend the color and height availability. Good drainage is a must as they will not survive

the winter in poorly drained clay soils. Amend the soil with humus and keep evenly moist. They can survive some drought once established. Use this plant to add bright colors to the front of the border, in containers, on the patio or along walkways. Bees and butterflies will visit the flowers and if some seeds are left to form, goldfinches will eat them.

Our Extension Master Gardener Volunteer Propagation Team worked tirelessly last winter and spring cutting, sticking, poking, seeding, transplanting and nurturing thousands of plant babies to mature size to be ready for the annual Master Gardener Plant Sale, including a couple hundred *gaillardia*. Alas, pandemic closures and the huge April event was canceled. The plants, since cared for by staff, continued to grow and needed a home.

Our New Hanover County cousin, the Cape Fear Museum, has a great mostly native plant garden at the Market Street location in Wilmington. With Cooperative in Extension's name, it seemed fitting that we offer to supplement the plantings in the Museum's garden. The Extension Master Gardener Volunteer Association gladly obliged to donate hundreds of plants to enhance the garden at the Museum, so the work began.

The soil in that garden is very sandy and generally full sun. Appropriately, we started with

the *gaillardia*, finding appropriate spaces between the native grasses and in open areas perfect for this tough plant. This flower will serve as a colorful blanket to fill in areas and provide great wildlife habitat and pollinator food. The work continues this week with additional plant species redirected from the Plant Sale inventory to a fitting home at the Museum garden. Isn't it nice to know that during this giant pandemic pause good work goes on? Many thanks to our generous Extension Master Gardener Volunteers.

The blanket flower is considered to be a sign of good luck by the Kiowa Native American tribe. Native plants are the foundation of natural ecosystems, providing food and shelter for native wildlife. This species attracts butterflies and is especially important to native bees.

So, if you want a blanket of flowers in your landscape, know to plant seed in the fall by direct sowing and lightly raking in, provide constant moisture for good germination, and mass plant it for some amazing warm colors in your landscape.

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