



Freeman Medal Winners: Their Outsized Impact on Biodiversity by Lisey Good

The Montine McDaniel Freeman Horticulture Medal is awarded annually to a North American native plant that's worthy of recognition for much more than its ornamental value. Indeed, each powerhouse plant is chosen for its major environmental benefits and its ability to support pollinators, at-risk insects, and songbirds. Here, we take a look at recent winners and their favorable impact on wildlife.

The Pollinator Champion: *Pycnanthemum flexuosum*, commonly known as mountain mint and native to Eastern North America (from Maine to Illinois and south to Florida through Texas) was chosen as Plant of the Year in 2018. Highly drought-resistant and a great naturalizer, mountain mint makes gardens hum with life quite literally. In fact, a 2016 study from Penn State's Southeast Research and Extension Center revealed that it attracted a greater diversity of insect life than any of the other native plants studied.

While its flowers are a favored nectar source for butterflies, honeybees, solitary wasps and bumble bees, mountain mint also attracts vital beneficial predatory insects that can naturally rid

gardens of common pests. For example, it is a favorite for the tachinid fly which devours cabbage moths, Japanese beetles and spongy moths, formerly known as gypsy moths. In winter, when pickings are slim for very hungry songbirds, mountain mint's attractive seedheads provide an important food source. Because its foliage contains an oil called pulegone which is a natural deer repellant, the presence of mountain mint can actually discourage white tail deer from grazing on nearby plants.

While encouraging gardeners to introduce mountain mint, the researchers at Penn State had a tip for those looking to increase biodiversity in their own yards even further, telling them to plant mountain mint with another pollinator favorite: *solidago rigida*, commonly known as goldenrod. This combination was shown to increase beneficial insect diversity the most by providing sustenance from early summer through late fall and into winter.

The Butterfly Magnet: *Aristolochia macrophylla*, or Dutchman's pipe, was the 2019 medal winner. A deciduous, woody vine named for the unusually shaped flowers that often hide under lush foliage, Dutchman's pipe is native to the eastern United States. Its flowers emit a faint but sweet, carrion-like odor which attracts small pollinating flies (who often become temporarily trapped inside the flowers), but it is the vine's role in hosting a rare, endangered butterfly that has endeared the plant to conservation-minded gardeners and lepidopterists.

When considering butterflies, many mistakenly think only of providing nectar sources for the adults, but equally important is the introduction of host plants for eggs that will later provide food for hungry caterpillars. The pipevine swallowtail butterfly uses Dutchman's pipe as a host plant, laying small clusters of red or orange eggs on stems or young leaves that are exposed to sunlight. Once the caterpillars hatch, they devour the leaves, temporarily stripping the plant but rarely harming it long-term. It is

important to note that certain exotic species of *aristolochia*, such as the giant or tropical varieties, attract but kill these same pipevine swallowtails, underscoring the sometimes life-or-death importance of planting varieties native to one's region.

The Songbird Savior: 2021's plant of the year, *cephalanthus occidentalis*, is known as buttonbush for its charming and distinct round white flowers. This shrub, native to much of the United States, is commonly found in wetlands or at the edges of ponds and can happily survive long periods of inundation, making it an attractive—and fragrant—choice for a rain garden or other wet areas. It has been used commercially as a pollen and nectar source for honeybees since the early eighteenth century, and it certainly does attract a variety of bees, as well as butterflies, and other pollinating insects. But its stellar benefits to birds is what truly sets it apart for the conservation-minded gardener. Many songbirds specifically opt to nest in the bushy foliage of mature buttonbush shrubs, while ducks, herons, and other water birds will consume its seeds. It is further known to attract and nurture a huge variety of colorful and melodious songbirds, including orioles, nuthatches, wrens, warblers, thrushes, mockingbirds, vireos, cardinals, grosbeaks, waxwings, chickadees, titmice and finches.

The Hummingbird's Favorite: With its long, tubular flowers, *lonicera sempevirens* (coral honeysuckle), the 2023 plant of the year, looks like it was purpose built for a hummingbird's long, narrow beak and even longer nectar-seeking tongue. Unlike its invasive cousin, Japanese honeysuckle, coral honeysuckle is native to the southeastern US, where if left to its own devices, it grows into a sprawling groundcover or shrub, though with the right supports, it can be trained to form an attractive tall vine for arbors or fencing. It is drought-resistant and hardy enough to grow in many areas, in a wide variety of soils. When present in the mid-Atlantic, coral honeysuckle's springtime flowers are an

especially important nectar source, blooming as hummingbirds need it most: just as they are passing through during their seasonal migration. In addition to hummingbirds, coral honeysuckle will attract many other birds, including quail, purple finches, goldfinches, hermit thrushes and robins.

The Habitat Helper: *Muhlenbergia capillaris*, also known as pink muhly or sweetgrass, was historically used in low-country South Carolina for basket weaving and has a native range extending from Kansas to Massachusetts, extending south to Florida. An easily grown prairie grass, it produces striking late season clusters of flowers (panicles) in its characteristic pinky red or purplish color. But it's not just gardeners who love it. By forming dense clumped canopies, it provides inclement weather shelter for birds, tiny mammals, and insects as well as a place to hide from predators. In spring, finches and sparrows seek out the grass as nesting material and then those same birds--plus nuthatches, chickadees, titmice, and woodpeckers--return in winter to feast on the plant's seeds. It's known to attract beneficial insects like lady bugs and is considered very deer resistant.