

American Senna

Senna hebecarpa

Happy 2015! It has been four years since I started my native plant garden, and I want to sincerely thank everyone at Wild Ones who generously gave me “starter” plants. Finally, this past season, I was able to “pay-it-forward,” giving away several American Senna seedlings and seeds. Folks asked questions about this plant, so...



American Senna is a sturdy, 4 to 6 foot, upright-growing member of the pea family (Fabaceae). It is native to North America, primarily east of the Mississippi from Ontario south to Georgia. It is considered endangered or threatened in some New England states.

The lacy pinnate leaves of this perennial are typical of the pea family. Borne on long, hairy stalks, the leaves are 6 to 8 inches long and consist of 12 to 20 opposite leaflets. Growing in large bushy clumps, the attractive leaves add beautiful texture to a garden. The root system consists of fibrous roots and rhizomes, from which vegetative colonies often form.

Senna flowers are NOT typical of a pea family. During July-September, spikes of numerous yellow flowers emerge on slender stems from the axils of the leaves at the top of the plant. Each flower has five unequal petals grouped into 3 above and 2 below, with conspicuous brown anthers, and stamens in groups of unequal length. Only the upper group of stamens are fertile.

Interestingly, American Senna have “extra-floral nectarines” at the base of each leafstalk. These upright ovoid glands produce additional nectar that attracts primarily ants and some beetles and flies. It is thought that some of these insects may protect the plant’s foliage from other insects.

In autumn, dark brown seedpods form which are 5 inches long, flat and somewhat curved. Each seedpod has 10-18 segments; and each segment contains a single flat, dark-brown seed only ¼ inch long. When dry, the seedpods split open explosively to release the seeds.

American Senna is found in moist thickets, open woods, and disturbed areas. The pollen is of special value to bumblebees, and also attracts halictid bees, butterflies, and hummingbirds. The plant is a larval host for the cloudless sulphur --a lemon colored butterfly. The seedpods are favored by larger birds like quail and wild turkey. The leaves, however, contain a powerful purgative called *anthroquinone*, and thus avoided by deer and other mammals.

Wild Senna is a great choice for gardens, hedges and restoration projects. Long-lived and hardy, it prefers mesic conditions, but will tolerate dry sites once established. The seeds have a hard coat which must be “scarified” or chipped in order to absorb water and sprout. Seedlings initially send their energy into their root system; slow growth of the plant above ground during the first two years is normal.

For more information and photos:

http://plants.usda.gov/factsheet/pdf/fs_sehe3.pdf

<http://www.friendsofthewildflowergarden.org/pages/plants/wildsenna.html>

www.illinoiswildflowers.info/savanna/plants/wild_senna.htm