

Rattlesnake Master

Eryngium yuccifolium

Although Rattlesnake Master resembles a yucca or other desert plant, it is a true species of the tallgrass prairies of central North America. It is actually a member of the carrot family....and its crushed stems smell like carrot.

American Indians used the root to treat rattlesnake bites, hence its common name. However, this plant does NOT provide an effective anecdote for snake bites. Its dried seed heads do sound a bit like a rattlesnake when shaken.



Rattlesnake Master grows 2-6 feet tall. Its stiff, narrow, sword-shaped leaves grow up to 3 feet long, tending to form a dense clump near the base of the plant. A few smaller leaves occur along the upper portions of the stems. The leaves have widely scattered, stiff teeth. The entire plant is bluish or grayish green and spreads 2 to 3 feet wide.

From June thru September, Rattlesnake Master produces dense golf ball-like flower heads at the top of stiff stems that rise 3-6 feet above the ground. About one-inch in diameter, each ball consists of numerous tiny white flowers, each flower having 5 petals. Whitish bracts stick out sharply from the flowers, giving the flower head a rough, prickly feel and appearance. As the flowers mature, the showy balls develop a bluish cast. Later, the flower heads turn brown – filled with quarter-inch long brown seeds.

The honey-like scent of Rattlesnake Master flowers attracts many pollinators including butterflies, skippers, moths, long and short-tongued bees, wasps, flies, and beetles. Caterpillars of the rare Rattlesnake Master Borer Moth (*Papaipema eryngii*) bore into the stems and feed on the pith. Nevertheless, deer and other herbivores tend to avoid this plant due to its coarse, prickly foliage and flower balls.

With its unique texture and sculptural overall form, Rattlesnake master can make quite a statement in your garden! It prefers full sun and sandy soil, but tolerates clay and shallow rocky soil. Tolerant of drought, Rattlesnake Master has no serious insect or disease problems. However, the plant can sprawl if grown in shade or overly fertile soils, and taller plants may need support. Massing this species with other tall plants may be the best solution for this problem.

Because Rattlesnake Master has a deep central taproot, it does not transplant well. However, it is easily propagated from seed. Seeds should be sown outdoors in fall to germinate in the spring. Rattlesnake Master provides interest to the winter landscape. Its fresh or dried flower heads make a distinctive addition to flower arrangements.

For more information and photos:

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

<http://wimastergardener.org/?q=RattlesnakeMaster>

<http://www.illinoiswildflowers.info/prairie/plantx/rattlesnakex.htm>