

Helen's Flower

By Kathleen Cue, Nebraska Extension Horticulture Educator

Helen's flower, *Helenium autumnale*, is a native perennial of the sunflower family, producing show-stopping 2-inch flowers in colors of yellow, gold, orange, red or variations in between. The notched petals, surrounding a yellowish brown globular cone, are a nice touch, giving the flowers the appearance of a ruffled skirt. The specific epithet "*autumnale*" refers to Helen's flower blooms in late summer/early autumn, a perfect time when pollinator populations are really booming. Helen's flower is also known by the unflattering moniker of "sneezeweed" which harkens back to when flower petals and leaves were dried for snuff.

Helen's flower, along with its cultivars, are hardy to USDA Zones 3-9. Helen's flower is not a long-lived perennial, often lasting 4-5 years before it quietly disappears. This trait shouldn't sway you from growing Helen's flower because, besides its ability to re-seed, the plant is a good food source for pollinators, displaying the greatest diversity of pollinators than any other native wildflower in University of Nebraska research.

An interesting and identifying feature of Helen's flower is the winged stem. Thankfully, the foliage of Helen's flower does not attract grazing from deer and rabbits. Plants are not prone to disease.

The cultivars of Helen's flower include 'Rotgold' and 'Rubinzweg', both readily found at garden centers and nurseries. 'Rotgold' has flowers of red and gold on plants three feet tall with an equal spread, making it a welcome addition to the back of the border. 'Rubinzweg' is shorter, producing rusty red flowers on plants that are just two feet tall and wide.

'Salsa' is a new cultivar of Helen's flower, sporting bright red flowers on plants 20 inches tall and having a similar spread. 'Mardi Gras' has red-orange flowers on robust 36 inch tall plants. Among the newest of the new is the Mariachi™ series, sporting bicolor flowers on 20 inch tall plants.

Although native, Helen's flower does not appreciate dry soils, instead preferring soils that are evenly moist to downright wet, making this a good plant for rain gardens and heavy clay soils. Helen's flower also likes a location receiving 4 or more hours of direct sunlight daily. In dry soil, plants will not thrive and will have a ragged appearance. Conversely, Helen's flower grown in a moist area will benefit from staking to hold the plant upright.

Altogether a colorful addition to the garden, consider planting Helen's flower for the added benefit of nectar and pollen for pollinators!