

Frostweed

Frostweed's native habitat includes open, dryish woodlands and stream banks from Pennsylvania west to central Texas and south to Florida. It prefers partial, or dappled, to full shade, making Frostweed a great ornamental understory plant for large oak or pecan trees. It is a good transitional plant between your more manicured landscape and wilder areas. Like a good Texas native, it is accepting of dry or moist, but well-draining, soil.



Frostweed can take up quite a bit of space, so keep that in mind when adding it to your landscape.

Frostweed grows between three feet and six feet tall, depending on how much water it gets. It has low to medium water requirements, so is not particularly thirsty, but can handle heavy rains as well as having a high tolerance to drought. It spreads by rhizomes, so will need to be divided if you plant in a small area or you can give it room to spread on its own. Because Frostweed can dominate the area where it is planted, it is best suited for naturalizing and not planted in the middle of a formal garden bed.

Trim back by at least one third in June to encourage a fuller plant and more autumn blooms. It is deciduous, but the largish, dark green leaves grow up an interesting stem that has fleshy wing-like flanges running the length of the stem. These are crucial to Frostweed's special winter feature. The stems grow straight up and remain unbranched until the flower heads appear in late summer.

Frostweed blooms during the hottest part of the year – August and September – then continues to bloom up to a hard freeze. The white compound flower heads can reach three to six inches across.



Having a blooming Frostweed encourages butterflies and native bees to visit your garden. Blooming in late summer and through the autumn, Frostweed provides nectar at a time when most other flowers are fading, so it is invaluable to several butterfly species and especially to native bees. It is a nectar plant for Pipevine butterflies, Monarchs, and Great Purple Hairstreaks. "Monarch Watch"

has selected Frostweed as a plant they monitor and encourage and it serves as a larval host for Summer Azure, Bordered Patch, and Silvery Checkerspot butterflies, as well.

It is easy to propagate Frostweed by digging and dividing the rhizomes in winter when the plant is dormant. You can also allow the seed heads to dry on the plant after the flowers have faded. Then remove them and collect the seeds.

Indigenous peoples used dried Frostweed leaves as ceremonial tobacco. It was also used as medicine for several maladies. Other parts of the plant were used as a laxative to ease gastrointestinal symptoms and urinary tract problems and to help certain eye ailments – so don't let children or pets eat Frostweed.

Frostweed shows off in winter? With the first freeze those straight, wing-like stems split at the base and sap comes oozing out and freezes into the most beautiful ribbon-esque sculptures of ice. These ice ribbons curl and flow around and up the stems in the most interesting ways. There are many names given to these wonders of nature – ice ribbons, ice flowers, frost beards, frost castles, among others. But you have to get out early to see them, because they melt quickly. These miniature ice sculptures are what give Frostweed its name.



*Photo Courtesy Allison, Myra B.,
Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower
Center*

If you want a plant that will bring wonder and beauty to your landscape over several seasons – especially at the end of the year – plant a Frostweed in a shady corner, sit back, and watch what it can do! August flowers, a bevy of butterflies, and ice sculptures in winter – who could ask for more!!

SOURCES:

Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, Wildflower.org "*Verbesina virginica*";
https://www.wildflower.org/plants/result.php?id_plant=vevi3

National Gardening Association: "All About Frostweed",
<https://garden.org/ideas/view/frostweed/1367/All-About-Frostweed-Verbesina-virginica/>