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# PARTY CRASHERS

## How Self-Seeders Create Garden Celebrations

by C.L. Fornari

**Y**ou know the type. They weren't invited to the garden party, but they show up anyway. Some arrive alone, while others make an entrance in a big, bold group. They may not have been invited, but they're so colorfully dressed and amusing that we let them stay. They are party crasher plants and they travel in good company. Self-seeding, they often bring pollinators and other wildlife with them, so when they're around our gardens become a diverse, flower-filled celebration. Yes, occasionally there are too many of these uninvited guests and we need to escort them to the brush pile. But many plants that sow their seeds in our gardens are truly the life of the party.

Why call them party crashers? Primarily because I like to view our landscapes and gardens as a celebration. Too often people approach their property like they do the interior of their house; they want to get it furnished and limit changes once they consider it done. Yet we all know that plants have their own agendas, and much of what happens in the natural world isn't in our power to change. Like a large party, there are things we can plan for and manage in our yards, but numerous others that are outside of our control.

Although there are many self-seeding plants, those that I call party crashers tend to mingle well in a crowd. They are the annuals, biennials, and perennials that grow in and among other plants without crowding their neighbors out. Usually these plants add to the celebration without overwhelming the venue or getting out of hand.

Party crasher plants aren't for everyone, however, and

it's important to know if you're the sort that will welcome their spontaneity and exuberance, or if you'll view them as a nuisance. The truth is, self-seeding plants aren't low maintenance. Like all your other party guests, they'll need tending to. You'll have to welcome them at the door by not routinely mulching, which limits the germination of their seeds. While they're getting acquainted with the other guests, you'll need to remove weeds so they have plenty of space to mingle. And if they've had a bit too much partying and have passed out in your landscape, they need to be pulled and escorted off the premises. Since these plants spread and socialize with others, they aren't for gardeners who don't want to weed and edit throughout the growing season.

If party crasher plants aren't easily controlled and require constant involvement from the gardener, why would you welcome them into your garden? From my experience, I'd answer this way: these plants bring drama and diversity. They turn a static landscape into a kaleidoscope of color that changes with the season, provides pollinator support, and produces visual exclamation points in the garden. These plants add serendipity and flare, often creating entertaining combinations gardeners would never consider trying.

Listed from A to Z, here are some of my favorite party crasher plants. Note that while these plants might be wonderful party guests for me in New England, in other areas they might become problematic. Before welcoming any crasher to your celebration, check to see what reputation it has in your state or region.



Self-seeded verbascum blooms in cheerful yellow while the corn poppies add a dash of red.

### *Asclepias tuberosa*

Commonly called butterfly weed, this perennial plant is drawn to party venues where the soil is well drained and not too rich. A North American native, *A. tuberosa* happily brings its bright orange flowers to celebrations in zones 3 to 9, and it does its best mingling in full sun. Flowering in mid-summer, this self-seeder travels with an entourage of butterflies, bees, and monarch larvae, so expect lots of buzz about your garden when these brilliant blooms show up.

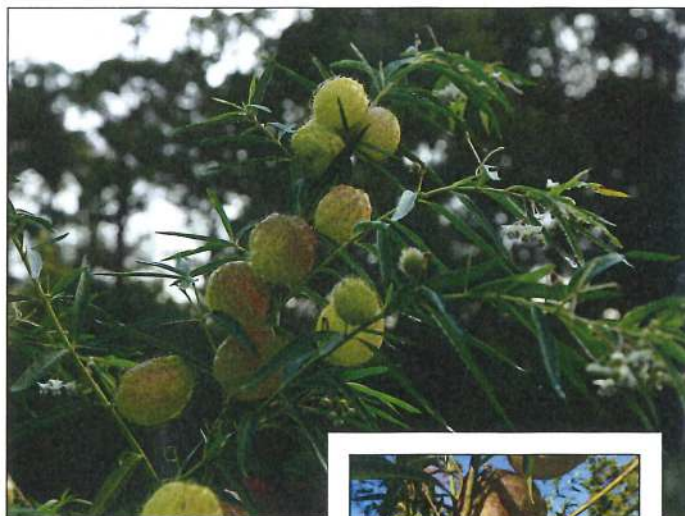


### *Gomphocarpus physocarpus*

If you want gatherings on your landscape to come alive, grow a plant called hairy balls. Yes, this *Gomphocarpus* is also known as balloon plant or swan plant, but you know that heads will turn when someone says, "Do you want to see my hairy balls?" Growing about four feet tall in a single summer, *Gomphocarpus physocarpus* is native to southeast Africa, a perennial in zones 8 to 10, and an annual in colder regions. Grow hairy balls in full sun and soil that tends toward the dry side. This *Gomphocarpus* is one of the only non-native hosts for monarch butterfly larvae. It is listed as invasive in Hawaii and other tropical regions.



A monarch larva feeds on *Gomphocarpus*, also known as hairy balls



*Gomphocarpus physocarpus* is native to southeast Africa. Although a perennial, it functions like an annual in growing zones below 8. Above you see it in bloom, and on the right is what the plant looks like when it has gone to seed.



Butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*) adds a pop of color



The striking cardinal flower blooms in late summer and its bright red flowers attract hummingbirds.

***Lobelia cardinalis***

Late summer garden parties, especially those that are in part shade, will cheer when the cardinal flower arrives. They come to the party fashionably thin and dressed in bright red. True, they imbibe more than many guests, so be prepared to serve a few extra drinks to this American native. Once you see their brilliant flowers against green foliage, however, you'll be happy to indulge this *Lobelia's* thirst.

***Nicotiana alata* and *mutabilis***

Flowering tobaccos are grown as annuals that self-seed in sun or part shade. They come to the party wearing a per-



fume that is sweet but never cloying. Although *N. mutabilis* is native to Brazil, it's tolerant of light frosts in northern gardens, making it the perfect support plant for late-to-migrate hummingbirds.

***Papaver rhoeas***

Annual poppies are the definition of flamboyant. Their brightly colored flowers wave on the tops of thin stems, and they are so pollen-rich that they seem to encourage bee debauchery. *P. rhoeas* is commonly called corn poppy or Flanders poppy, and is native to Europe. *P. somniferum*, also known as bread seed poppy or opium poppy, is also an extravagantly beautiful flower that comes in a variety of colors. Some gardeners shy away from letting *P. somniferum* crash their parties since technically the DEA could prosecute anyone growing this Mediterranean native in their gardens.



The honey bees love visiting the bread poppy flowers

***Rudbeckia triloba***

Brown-eyed Susan is a biennial or short-lived perennial in zones 4 to 8, and is a prized party guest because she's just so darn cheerful. This plant is happy to party in part-shade or full sun, blooms for several weeks in late summer, and consorts well with shorter perennials since it grows three to four feet tall without shading the plants below.



Flowering tobaccos add height and charm to a garden

### *Verbascum chaixii*

I've never met a *Verbascum* that I didn't love and based on the action in my garden when they're in flower, I'd say the bees feel the same way. *Chaixii*, also known as nettle-leaved mullein, is a party guest that tends to invite all of its relatives, however, so it's one that requires a heavy hand with editing excess plants. I cut all that have finished flowering to the ground before they set seeds, and pull excess plants as they appear. This also improves the look of the garden once the blooms have faded and keeps my gardens from becoming a nettle-leaved mullein forest.



The author's garden full of *Verbascum chaixii*

### *Verbena bonariensis*

This tender perennial shows up in great numbers where soil is well-drained, and grows quickly to four feet tall. It is a perfect plant for perennial garden celebrations, since the stems and leaves are so thin that it always plays well with others. The small purple blossom on the end of a thin, stiff stem lasts well in bouquets and dances well with other cutting flowers such as zinnias or dahlias.



Verbena and hairy balls grow by the garden shed



Corn poppies that sprung up uninvited, but may stay as welcomed guests

### *Zizia aurea*

I offer three reasons to invite *Zizia* to your garden party. 1) The bright yellow flower umbels are a lovely cut flower that looks good with peonies. 2) In the carrot family, this plant is the host for swallowtail butterfly larvae. 3) If you plant *Zizia* and *Asclepias*, you can truthfully say that your garden contains flowers "from A to Z." Consider *Zizia*, also known as golden Alexander, for your guest list if you're in zones 3 to 8 and want a plant for moist soils in sun or part shade.



No matter what type of self-seeding plants you invite to your garden celebrations, be sure to let the seeds mature on the varieties you wish to encourage, but promptly remove those who are already on the verge of overwhelming the party. Let seed pods stay on the plant until they turn brown. At that point you can either let them fall to the ground to seed in place, or you can scatter them in other locations where you'd like them to grow. Don't mulch the areas where you've spread the seeds, and the following spring you're likely to see young plants arriving as your celebration gets started. When it comes to party crashers, they're always up for a good time. 🌸

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