

Spotted Joe-Pye Weed — *Eupatorium maculatum*

When I first started thinking about native plants to recommend for residential gardens, I did not include Joe-Pye Weed in the list – too tall and overwhelming I thought. But I have since seen it used in different garden situations and changed my mind. This native wildflower can be a spectacular accent and is a butterfly and pollinator magnet to boot!

[Phipps](#) characterizes Spotted Joe-Pye Weed as typically growing from 5-7 feet tall while the Facebook site [Wildflowers of Western Pennsylvania](#) gives it a range of from 2-10'. I suspect that, like other plants, it all depends on the soil moisture and fertility conditions as well as sun.

This wildflower used to be classified in the genus, *Eupatorium*, but the scientific nomenclature divisions have since been revised and it is now included in the genus *Eutrochium*. This new genus includes plants that are characterized by a whorled leaf pattern of attachment. In this species it is around a purple or purple-spotted stem, hence its common name. Eight inch-long toothed leaves circle the stem in usually in groups of 4-5.

Spotted Joe-Pye Weed adds a lush vertical statement at the back of the garden in late summer. Loose branching clusters (panicles) of fragrant, tiny mauve to pale pink flowers bloom from late July to September for about a month. Each overall flower cluster is approximately 6-8 inches wide and more dome shaped than flat topped. Seed is wind dispersed, so you may find it spreading elsewhere in the garden. Young plants are easy to recognize



The flower panicle of Joe-Pye Weed. Each small cluster consists of 8-20 smaller individual florets.

Photo: <https://www.facebook.com/WildflowersOfWesternPennsylvania>



Plants classified in the *Eutrochium* genus have whorled leaves.

Photo: Paul G Wiegman in <https://www.phipps.conservatory.org/plant-finder>

by the whorled leaf and can be controlled by pulling them when small. The plant will also spread by underground rhizomes and create a small clonal cluster.

In the wild, Joe-Pye Weed is a plant of full sun and moist/wet soil. In fact, it is tolerant of short periods of standing water. You will see it in wet meadows, roadside ditches and near pond, lake, and stream edges. In my previous backyard garden, I planted it against a back fence in an area where I knew rainwater flowed across the yard in rainstorm events. Spotted Joe-Pye Weed will also adapt to more standard garden soil conditions. One friend planted this wildflower along the back property line to create a visual screen during the summer and fall. It would also be successful in rain gardens.

Flowers produce nectar and pollen that attract a wide variety of native bees, butterflies, moths and skippers. Heather Holm's [Pollinators of Native Plants](#) describes this Joe-Pye species as offering a large amount of nectar to visiting pollinators. Most visit this flower for this reason; only a few bees visit to collect pollen. Butterflies that may be found visiting include Monarchs, Viceroy's, Eastern Tiger Swallowtails, White Admirals among others. This species is also the larval host plant for two moth species, one - the [Ruby Tiger Moth](#) - is quite lovely. Native bees attracted to the nectar supply include bumblebees, leafcutter bees, cuckoo bees, and green sweat bees.

One caution is that the seeds of this dramatic native are wind dispersed so you may find little Joe-Pyes popping up elsewhere in the garden, particularly if you have areas of bare soil. You may choose to remove the seed heads on the mother plant before they are released to prevent this spread. Personally, as the flower cluster begins to transition to seed, I enjoy watching house finches raid the seed with excited chirping conversation. It is easy to pull small plants if you find them in undesirable locations.



This close-up shows the thin filiform flower styles that serve as guides to the stigma and ovary for fertilization.

Photo: https://www.illinoiswildflowers.info/wetland/plants/sp_joepye.htm



Joe-Pye Weed in a residential garden; fronted by Black-eyed Susan

Photo: Todd Haiman Landscape Design, New York City
<https://www.toddhaimanlandscapedesign.com/>

In spite of this tendency, I consider Spotted Joe-Pye Weed to be a worthwhile addition to the garden when planted where its size and structure can be shown to advantage.

For more reading about this native wildflower, see [Wildflowers of Western Pennsylvania](#) on Facebook. Use the search tool and search for the scientific name. A number of cultivars have been bred for various characteristics such as height, or leaf, flower and stem color. 'Phantom,' 'Atropurpureum,' 'Gateway,' and 'Purple Bush' are among them. Shorter selections, 'Little Joe,' and 'Baby Joe,' are selected from a different spe-

A note about cultivars: Cultivars are selections of a species or hybrids of several species that are propagated vegetatively or by tissue culture in order to maintain the preferred character. Hence, all *Eutrochium* 'Gateway' for example, a selection from *Eutrochium maculatum*, are genetically identical. The nectar or pollen value can be diminished or lost with these manipulations. Changes in leaf color can also have an impact. When possible, it is best to plant the native species. For more information on this question see Annie White's [How Native Plant Cultivars Affect Pollinators](#).



Joe-Pye Weed rocking it in the [Phipps Discovery Garden](#)



Another residential garden example
Photo: Flickr, nlockfans-pinterest



A male Eastern Tiger Swallowtail. Females can be distinguished by showing blue along the bottom of their wings just above the black edging.
Photo: T Beckjord