

# COREOPSIS 'MOONBEAM'

## *How it was named*

 By Léonie Bell

A recent Wayside Gardens catalog exults: "Truly a treasure . . . we rate this as one of the 10 all time great perennials!" There has been much speculation about the plant's history and name. While the original source remains something of a mystery, I can explain how *Coreopsis* 'Moonbeam' got its name.

Many years ago we had a neighbor here in Spring Mill (outside Conshohocken, Pa.) who was a genuine tinker, a fabricator of tin. Our American term "roofer" hardly touched upon the diverse skills of Howard Chidester. Besides installing copper gutters, he rebuilt our porch and fitted yards of bookshelves and cupboards to the crooked walls of this old stone house. We shared the great songs of the Forties because he'd moonlit in a band, playing clarinet and sax. But best of all, we were both avid gardeners.

One day he brought to work a berry-boxed plant of a small lemon-yellow daisy found at a farmer's stand on the way home from Tom's River, New Jersey. Up until then, around 1960, I'd refused to admit the *Coreopsis* clan to the garden. Their color in June, bright chrome yellow, clashed horribly with the old roses that queen the place, their stems leaned and their roots got into everything. This little thing looked like the Threadleaf species, *C. verticillata*, except for the marvelous cool lemon color.

A month after planting it I thought, this is odd: lots of bloom with plenty of buds coming. Could it really be everblooming? By October we could still find a few pale stars for the small nose-gays our girls loved to make.

Over winter I noticed how miniscule dark bronzed rosettes marked its location

after the dry stems had been removed. By spring the tufts had increased a bit, enough to pry up pieces to share with a friend. The moment she saw the sulfur daisies in May she said, "This is the kind I've been looking for. At garden marts you can never tell which you'll get, they're all marked *C. verticillata* because they look the same at first." So it had been around for awhile. My 1950 *Gray's Manual* was no help, no pale variants were described. Perhaps nursery-men could tell me more about it.

### *doesn't sucker*

The first to consult was "Bill," owner of Hildemere Nursery on Route 1 in Wawa, Pa. He had never heard of a lemon *Coreopsis* and when I added that it didn't sucker much, he burst out with, "A *Coreopsis* that doesn't sucker? That'll be the day!" Still, he took the proffered plant. (Years later when I tried to find the Hildemere Nursery directly across from the Wawa Dairy, it seemed to have disappeared into thin air, the gentle slopes once checkered with beds had left not a trace. Small wonder. On top of it now lies the Franklin Mint.)

Another start went up to Barre, Vermont, where Donald Allen had Sky-Cleft Gardens, a notable rock garden nursery, long gone. He had expressed interest in two plants I had, the *Coreopsis*, which was entirely new to him, and a dwarf everblooming form of *Rosa arkansana plena* 'Woodrow.' While the rose refused to root, the *Coreopsis* responded so well to "forced propagation" that he had enough stock to offer in his 1965 catalog. When he asked, "What shall we name it?" I wrote back, "Oh, something with moon in it." And so it was listed:

*continued*

photo by Léonie Bell





*Coreopsis* 'Moonbeam' blends well with nasturtiums and *Salvia farinacea* 'Victoria' in a dooryard garden in Plymouth Meeting.

*Coreopsis* 'Moonbeam,' no species given.

The best way to insure the longevity of a rare plant is to give some away. In the crush of work to complete a book in 1966, I lost the original 'Moonbeam' to some voracious matting perennial, when there was no time to keep track of small defenseless treasures. Knowing Donald Allen had stock, I knew it could be replaced. Yet plants, unlabeled, continued to surface in local nurseries. In April you had to look very close to decide if a potted plant was the ordinary *C. verticillata*, or the more compact, darker-green-leaved lemon-yellow version.

Inevitably, 'Moonbeam' attracted the interest of botanists. Dr. Art Tucker of

Dover State College in Delaware sent material to Dr. Edwin Smith at the University of Arkansas, considered to be the world authority on *Coreopsis*, for his opinion. Smith's opinion is that 'Moonbeam' is not a form of *C. verticillata* at all but one of a hybrid complex known as *C. x delphinifolia*. This is made up of *C. verticillata*, *C. tripteris*, and possibly *C. major*, according to experimental crosses made by Dr. Smith, and occurs in the wild only in South Carolina and Georgia. Whether the original plant or anything like the lemon 'Moonbeam' has been found there is as yet not known.

Incredibly, the type of *C. x delphinifolia*

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was illustrated over 240 years ago by Georg Dionysius Ehret, compeer of Linnaeus, in 1749. Two other cultivars now thought to belong to his hybrid complex are 'Zagreb' and 'Golden Showers,' both with the more usual chrome-yellow daisies and greater height. Art Tucker and Rick Darke, curator of plants at Longwood Gardens, are now working on a paper about these.

I can't think of a tint that harmonizes more agreeably with the most garish flower colors than the sulfurous 'Moonbeam.' In some lights the one-inch daisies have an almost greenish cast. Take a bed of scarlet, magenta and orange, add a dash of 'Moonbeam,' and you'll have a smashing combination. The first buds spread in late May and from then until frost, they never stop. For the garden's benefit if not its own, 'Moonbeam' is probably sterile, which would explain why it keeps on blooming in a futile attempt to produce seed.

At peak bloom in September, a plant is about 18 inches across and usually no more than a foot high, often less, the dark stems and leaves so wiry and fine that the eight-petaled flowers seem to float above a tangled mass. Rebloom will occur whether or not you shear the stems back in July or August. Although a sandy peat soil mix keeps the plant compact, 'Moonbeam' will grow well almost anywhere in full sun or partial shade. Here is one American perennial that owes nothing to the "improvements" made by the English or the Germans.

All we can hope now is that someone in South Carolina or Georgia will come up with the beginning of this story.

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Lifetime gardener Lee Bell started with wildflowers, moved on to weeds, and graduated to old roses, finding lost names for old kinds still growing in this country. Bell is the current editor of *Heritage Rose Group's* quarterly *Letter*. Her photographs now augment her superb botanical illustrations made for many years.