

## *Gaillardia aristata* Blanket Flower

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Photo: Drake Barton

*Gaillardia aristata* (Blanket Flower)

**B**lanket flower, or *Gaillardia aristata* in botanical circles, is one of seven plants that were collected on July 7, 1806 near Lewis & Clark Pass. These specimens still exist today and are housed in the Lewis & Clark Herbarium in Philadelphia.

Lewis & Clark Pass is perhaps misnamed, since William Clark never saw the pass and did not cross the Continental Divide at that point. Meriwether Lewis, on the advice of native American guides, did cross the Continental Divide at present-day Lewis & Clark Pass on July 7, 1806 on his way to uncover the cache left on White Bear Island and the eventual exploration of the Marias River. It must have been a busy day for Lewis and his party of nine men. They broke camp on Beaver Creek, about two miles west of present-day Lincoln, at 7:00 a.m. and made it all the way to three miles east of Table Mountain before stopping for the night. They traversed Lewis & Clark Pass and Lewis not only took readings of his position and calculated distances, he wrote an entry in his journal and collected, pressed and made notes about at least seven plant species. Lewis says of Lewis & Clark Pass, "passing the dividing ridge between the waters of the Columbia and Missouri rivers at ¼ of a mile. from this gap which is low and an

easy ascent on the W. side the fort mountain bears North East, and appears to be distant about 20 Miles."

Blanket flower, a handsome member of the aster or sunflower family (Asteraceae), was collected west of Lewis & Clark Pass before Lewis and his party crossed the Continental Divide. The original annotation made by the botanist Frederick Pursh says, "Rocky mountains Dry hills. Jul. 7th 1806."

Blanket flower is a perennial wildflower that grows from eight to 24 inches high with a single or several stems arising from a slender taproot. The leaves are alternate on the stem and can be entire, divided or variously toothed. The leaves, stems and receptacles are covered with coarse, long hairs. *Aristata* means awn or bristle and refers to the stiff awns on the fruit. The heads, which resemble sunflowers, are two to three inches across. The ray flowers are yellow with three lobes on the tip of each ray petal, and the disk flowers form a brownish-red cluster in the center.

This attractive wildflower blooms from late May to September on open plains and prairies with dry to moist soils from the foothills up to almost 8,000 feet elevation. It is found from Yukon and Mackenzie in northern Canada south to California and New Mexico, and east to Quebec, Canada and New York. It is considered rare in Minnesota. Lewis and Clark

must have seen the species often in the summer of 1806.

As you might suspect, blanket flower makes a great addition to flower gardens of all types. There are ornamental varieties available, but our native species is beautiful and perfectly adapted to the conditions found in Montana. Once the plants are established they are drought-tolerant in moderately-well-drained soils. They can be propagated by seed or by division of the rootstock. Blanket flower is a good choice for those who are beginning to cultivate an interest in Montana native plants. They are easily grown from seed and will self-seed, as well. And, they are deer-resistant.

The Blackfoot Indians made a tea from the roots for gastrointestinal problems. An infusion of the plant was used to treat sore nipples caused by nursing, and was also used to treat sore eyes. A poultice of the root was used for skin disorders, and a root infusion was used to treat horses with saddle sores, falling hair or sore eyes. The Blackfoot used the flower heads for food, putting them in soups and stews to absorb the liquid. They also used the flower heads to waterproof rawhide bags.

If you visit Lewis & Clark Pass, remember how Meriwether Lewis collected a single specimen of blanket flower and carried it all the way back to St. Louis. His specimen was new to western science and helped spark the interest in western plant species of horticultural value. Blanket flower is now grown all over the world in gardens and landscape plantings. Plant some in your native garden, or just enjoy it on the prairies and hillsides of Montana.



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