

Specimen Spotlight

Purple Coneflower

Have you ever wondered why Illinois is nicknamed “The Prairie State”? Less than one percent of the original prairie remains in Illinois. Where did all that prairie go? Is it possible to bring prairie back to the city?

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A great example of a plant used in prairie restoration is the Purple Coneflower, a beautiful wildflower native to much of Central Illinois. Once widespread throughout the midwest, coneflowers decreased in number as the native prairies were turned into farmland. But the coneflowers are still well adapted to this region and climate. They are grown in gardens and projects to restore prairies. Coneflowers and other prairie plants have been preserved through “seed banks”, including those at the Field Museum, where seeds are collected, stored, and then used to restore native prairies. In the Field Museum’s collection of around 40 million specimens, prairie plants from the past and present are preserved.

But we don’t stop there. The Field Museum’s Keller Science Action Center works with Chicagoland communities, organizations, and youth to collect seeds, remove non-native plants, and restore habitats. This helps local communities understand and respect the plants and animals that share their ecosystem, and inspires a love for nature. Find out more about what the Keller Center does here:

<https://www.fieldmuseum.org/blog/planting-seeds-conservation>

In addition, the Field Museum maintains the Rice Native Gardens right on the museum campus. In the terraces and gardens around the north side of the museum, native plants are carefully planted and maintained, and visitors can walk around to observe and enjoy them. Try to identify the Purple Coneflower as you walk through! Find out more about the Rice Native Gardens here:

<https://www.fieldmuseum.org/science/conservation/greener-field/greener-field-planting-and-growing>

So why is all this important? Native plants are important in an ecosystem. They are adapted to the climate, and many native animals count on them. Purple Coneflowers provide pollen for long-tongued bees and butterflies. Birds, especially Goldfinches, feed on the seeds. By preserving Purple Coneflowers and other native plants, we help to preserve our native prairie legacy, and protect the animals and plants that call this endangered ecosystem home.

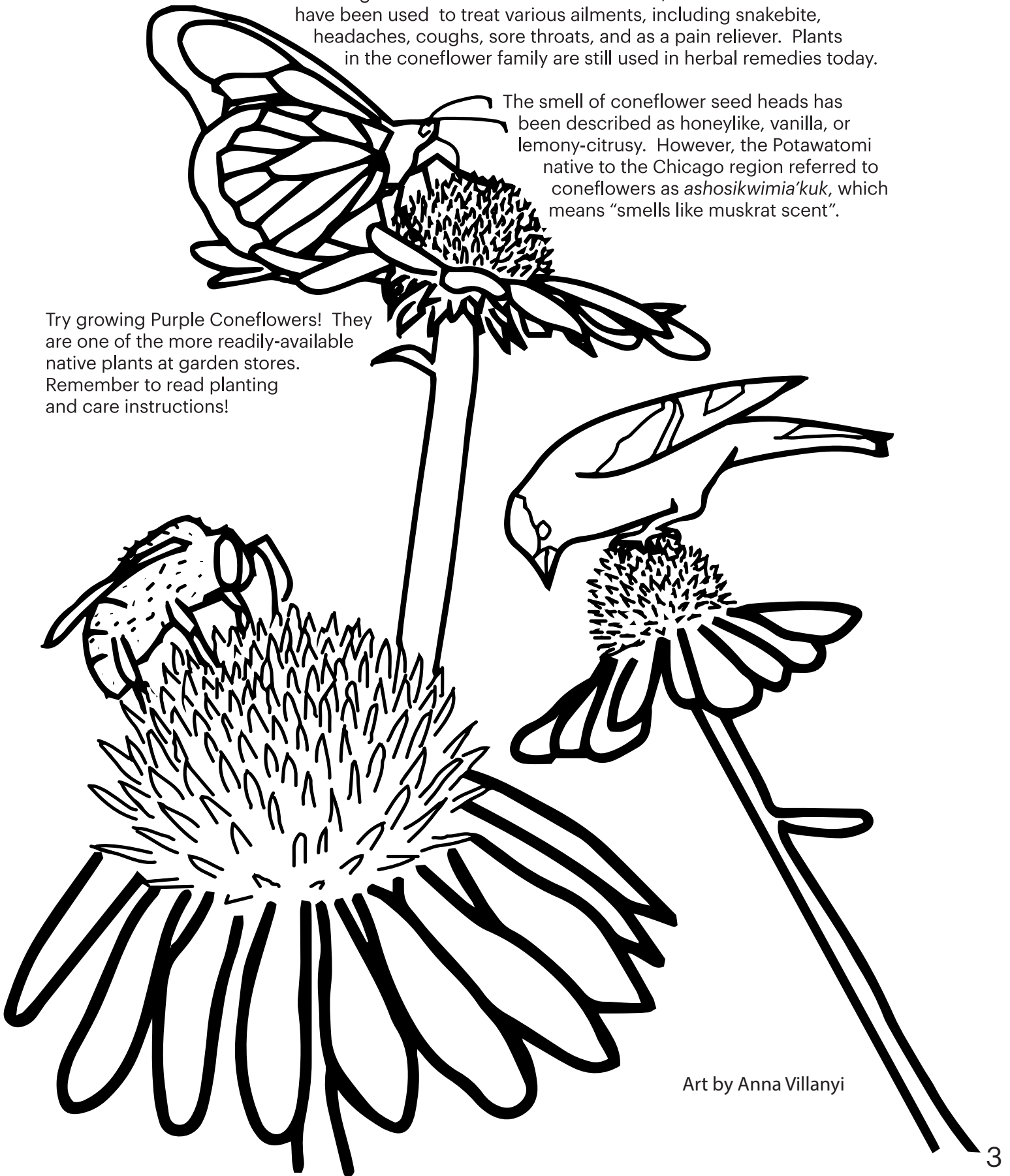
Purple Coneflower Fun Facts!

Purple coneflowers can grow 2-4 feet tall, but their roots can grow 5 feet deep! This helps them survive dry and windy conditions typical of the prairie ecosystem.

According to the USDA National Plant Center, coneflowers have been used to treat various ailments, including snakebite, headaches, coughs, sore throats, and as a pain reliever. Plants in the coneflower family are still used in herbal remedies today.

The smell of coneflower seed heads has been described as honeylike, vanilla, or lemony-citrusy. However, the Potawatomi native to the Chicago region referred to coneflowers as *ashosikwimia'kuk*, which means "smells like muskrat scent".

Try growing Purple Coneflowers! They are one of the more readily-available native plants at garden stores. Remember to read planting and care instructions!



Art by Anna Villanyi