Plant of the Month: September

Scientific Name: *Eryngium aquaticum*

Common Name: Water Eryngo

Selected by: Bennett Dowling, Horticulturist

In the extreme heat and humidity of South Carolina summer, it is rare to find many plants with fresh foliage and flower by August and September. However, the native water eryngo waits until the dog days of summer, at which point airy stalks capped with icy, pale blue flowers rise above the succulent, grassy green foliage clumps. If you are familiar with sea holly or sea thistle, a staple of trendy florists, this is the native cousin that thrives in our moist soils, high heat and humidity and warm summer nights, conditions that would smother its kin.

What attributes make this such a great plant? First let’s start with the foliage which, though not really interesting, at least looks good all summer. The leaves are rich green, leathery and grass-like, forming clumps around 12-18” tall, easily filling space in the front to middle of the perennial border. By late summer, airy stalks emerge from these clumps and are crowned with countless intricate blossoms that are abuzz with countless bees, flies, and butterflies in the late season. Each flower has a prickly cone surrounded by a spreading crown of pale lilac or white bracts. The flowers are very leathery, and therefore hold color and form over a long time period. In areas with open, moist soils, eryngo will set seed after flowering, though not enough to be a nuisance.

As aforementioned, unlike many of its relatives, eryngo is adapted to the challenges of our region. Its native range is the coastal regions of the east coast from New York through Florida and then along the Gulf Coast into Louisiana. It prefers moist to wet, rich soils, but will grow in any garden soil that is not prone to drought. Full sun is ideal, but partial shade is tolerated. Each winter, this plant goes completely dormant, so make sure you remember its location before you mess around in the garden in early spring.