

Activity: Planting Goal: Cognitive/Intellectual Populations: All

## TH Activity Plan – Black-Eyed Susans @ the Preakness Stakes

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Photo by Visit Baltimore & Flower Patch Farmhouse



### Materials

Live plant - Black-Eyed Susan,  
seeds, potting medium,  
containers, water,

Knives

Gloves, wipes



**ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION:** Participants will learn how to grow Black-Eyed Susan flowers from seed & through division, in celebration of Preakness Stakes horse race & its connection to this flower.

### THERAPEUTIC GOALS:

**Cognitive/Intellectual:** Expand horticultural knowledge of flowering plant cycle through seed & propagation methods; expand reasoning skills

**Physical:** Reduce physiological based symptoms like irritability & restlessness & tremors due to cravings from substance use

**Psychological/Emotional:** Discuss deception (i.e. painted flowers) & the negative aspects deception; discuss openness, resiliency, & motivation

**Sensory:** Explore sensory & internal (interoception) signals felt during hands-on plant activity

**Social:** Celebrate in a group setting using plants & horse racing

### STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS:

1. **Pre-Session Preparation:** Gather materials. Gain access to a mature plant to be used for division propagation.
2. Facilitator begins session by mentioning the flower connection of Black-Eyed Susans at the Preakness Stakes horse race. Pass around the flower in a container, encouraging participants to touch, smell & look at the very popular flower.
3. Facilitator asks if participants are familiar with this Triple Crown horse race, & with flower connections to this & other horse races. Ask why they think flowers have become associated with horse races, prompting intellectual curiosity, humor & reasoning skills.
4. Share the fact that Black-Eyed Susans are not in bloom in mid-May when the Preakness happens. It is the official flower of Maryland, hence why it was chosen. Typically, the flower garland for the winning horse is made with a mix of painted daisies & mums that resemble Black-Eyed Susans, a plant deception.
5. Deception is not required for the TH session which will include planting seeds & propagating by division of the actual wildflower, Black-Eyed Susan. The facilitator can choose to do propagation either as a demonstration or hands-on activity depending on availability & number of plants. Materials are distributed & activities commence.

**APPLICATIONS FOR POPULATIONS:** Plant metaphors and symbols play a role in society in a variety of ways. One such example are flowers associated with important horse races. Most people have heard of the Triple Crown

racers so exploring flower connections to these can be enjoyable, providing intellectual and experiential stimulation, be it horticulture facts or methods, or by getting hands in actual soil.

Black-Eyed Susans (*Rudbeckia*), used for the floral garland presented to the winning horse at the Preakness Stakes, is the official flower of the state of Maryland, and has also come to mean encouragement, motivation and resilience, all important traits for horse racing. Others consider the flower an embodiment of hope and optimism with its cheerful and colorful yellow petals. These are all-important traits for horse racing. For populations with psychological challenges, these traits can be explored for their role in human development using the plant symbol as the starting point for discussions.

A secondary theme related to the Preakness race is that of deception. Because Black-Eyed Susans are not in bloom in May, they are replaced by painted flowers on the horse garland where mums (flowers) are substituted. Fun fact: florists dab the center of every single one of the thousands of flowers in the 18” x 90” blanket with black lacquer to recreate the appearance of a Black-Eyed Susan. Though this is not an illegal deception, it can provide discussion points for groups to investigate how deception impacts their and others’ life choices.

**SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS: Facilitators are responsible for knowing poisonous and toxic plants and plant parts.** Gloves are recommended for sensitivity to soil, sap or other materials. It may not be appropriate for some individuals or populations to use sharp pruners or knives.

**NOTES OR OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:** Growing ‘Susans’ from seed can be done in a variety of conditions including seed starting at any time of year using grow lights. Germination typically occurs in 7-30 days. For plants intended for outdoor beds, start seeds indoors 10 weeks before last expected frost date. Harden seedlings off before planting in ground. Seeds can also be planted directly outdoors. Scatter seeds, covering with a light topping of soil and watering regularly so that seeds are kept moist until established.

Propagating ‘Susans’ by division can be successful when done in early spring or fall after they finish flowering. Dig up the root ball, and using a sharp knife, cut it apart ensuring that each division has roots. Replant 12-18” apart. Water regularly until well established.

Transplanting young starts may be an option for the TH session. These can be purchased online or at nurseries, and transplanted into individual containers for participants to take home. Sharing tips for transplanting in the ground will guide participants - ensure the seedlings have a second set of true leaves before transplanting into a sunny location. Deadheading ‘Susans’ will encourage blooms, prolonging flowering.

Black-Eyed Susans come in a variety of colors, heights and forms. ‘Double Gold’ (*Rudbeckia hirta*) is double-flowered at 3’ tall, ‘Goldsturn’ (*Rudbeckia fulgida*) meaning gold storm is a long-lived perennial, ‘Cherokee Sunset’ comes in orange, bronze and mahogany double blooms that reseed, and ‘Herbstsonne’ (*Rudbeckia laciniata*) at 4-7’ tall has petals that spread wide and droop, with gumdrop shaped green center cones.

Flowers have become synonymous with Triple Crown Horse races, with flower garlands placed on the winning horse. Refer to other THADS with a similar theme and for more horse-related activities with flowers: [Kentucky Derby’s Run for the Roses & Flower Crowns](#), and [Stargazer Lilies at the Kentucky Oaks Supports Breast Cancer Awareness](#).

#### **REFERENCES/ RESOURCES:**

Balogh, A. (2025). [Growing glorious black-eyed Susans](#). *Garden Design.com*.

Sprecher, MH. (2025). [Those aren’t Black-Eyed Susans and other secrets of the Triple Crown](#). *Sports Destination.com*.

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TH Activity Plan form developed by Lesley Fleming, Susan Morgan and Kathy Brechner (2012), revised in 2025.