

## Fall Blooming Asters

As the summer heat and humidity have taken their toll and most perennial flowers have gone dormant or are fading, asters give a last blast of bloom with masses of daisy-like flowers in shades of pink, white, blue, magenta and purple. The flowers not only enhance the fall garden, they produce late season nectar for butterflies and other beneficial insects. There are approximately 250 types of asters which are native to North America<sup>1</sup>, and more non-native ones. The asters range from a height of under 1 ft to over 6 ft, most thrive in average to moist well-drained soil and full sun but some tolerate poor dry soil. There are also asters that grow in partial or deep shade. Therefore, there is an aster suitable for almost any spot in the garden. As usual, to avoid confusion, each plant will be referred to by its common name as well as its scientific name which includes the genus, species, and the variety, as applicable. Formerly, all asters have the genus name of *Aster*. However, advances in science have led botanists to reclassify some asters to a different genus such as *Lonactis*, *Eurybia*, *Symphyotrichum*, e.g. *Aster laevis* is now *Symphyotrichum laeve*. Those are still asters under different names.

### Choice of asters:

With such a large number of asters, it is not easy to summarize their cultural needs in a few words. They can be roughly lumped into three broad groups<sup>1</sup>:



- Asters that thrive in full sun and average to moist soil. Some species may be tolerant to dry sites. The popular New England asters (*Symphyotrichum novae-angliae*, e.g. 'Purple Dome', 'Alma Potschke' (picture to the left)) and New York asters (*Symphyotrichum novi-belgii*, e.g. 'Professor Anton Kippenburg'), which come in a wide variety of plant heights and colors, do best with steady moisture. Other asters such as Aromatic asters (*Symphyotrichum oblongifolium*, e.g. 'October Skies', 'Raydon's Favorite', and 'Dream of Beauty'), Smooth asters (*Symphyotrichum laeve*, e.g. 'Blue Bird'), Heath asters (*Aster ericoides*), Sky Blue asters (*Aster oolentangiensis*), and Calico aster (*Aster lateriflorus*, e.g. 'Lady in Black') prefer moist soils but are more tolerant to dry sites

than others.

- Sun-loving asters that prefer cool night temperatures and average to moist soil with excellent drainage. They can be short-lived if good winter drainage is not provided.

Asters in this group are Italian asters (*Aster amellus*), East Indies asters (*Aster tongenolensis*), Frikart's asters (*Aster x frikartii*, e.g. 'Monch').

- Woodland asters that tolerate deep shade but bloom best in light to partial shade.

They prefer moist and humus-rich soil but tolerate dry conditions too. Examples are White wood asters (*Eurybia divaricate* species or the slightly shorter variety 'Eastern Star'), and Blue wood asters (*Symphyotrichum cordifolium* (picture to the right)).



One usually chooses an aster based on the sun or shade garden location, soil condition, plant height, bloom color, bloom time, and to a lesser extent, stem and leaf traits<sup>1,2,3</sup>. However, foliage diseases such as powdery mildew and rust are limiting factors to growing asters well. Selecting disease resistant plants is the gardener's first defense against these often debilitating and disfiguring pests. In a study<sup>1</sup> that rated 119 different asters based on strong habits, superior flower production, excellent disease resistant and winter hardiness through a six-year evaluation term, 26 types are found resistant to both powdery mildew and rust. Among those 26 types, 17 are also overall excellent or good performers. It is noted that, among the 53 New England and New



York asters studied, four New York asters and two New England asters received good rating. On the other hand, all five Aromatic asters in the study all ranked good to excellent. The aster shown at left is Aromatic aster 'Raydon's Favorite' (*Symphotrichum oblongifolium* 'Raydon's Favorite'). As a deciduous plant with green foliage color in summer and fall, it has a strikingly beautiful mounded appearance with masses of 1¼" violet blue daisy-like flowers on 2- 3 ft tall multi-stemmed plant from late August to November. It has been rated in the top seven performers in the above study<sup>1</sup>, and has been called one of the most reliable native perennial aster<sup>4</sup>.

### Care of Asters

Asters generally do not need pruning<sup>5</sup>. However, pinching or shearing of taller varieties to remove up to half their height in early to mid-June results in shorter and more bushy plants that do not need staking. Early pruning is also helpful in improving uneven habits. This process should not be done after early July or you might miss the fall blooms altogether. Deadheading is not usually required<sup>5</sup> but will reduce unwanted seedlings. Asters propagate from self-seeding and underground rhizomes. Some species may be propagated from basal cuttings<sup>5</sup>. Clump division in spring is the easiest way to get new plants. Some varieties need crown division every few years to get reinvigorated<sup>1</sup>.

Lower leaves of some asters may desiccate in the summer, becoming unsightly and resulting in bare lower stems. The problem can be solved by careful placement behind low growing plants in the garden.

Asters are generally not rabbit or deer resistant<sup>1</sup>.

Powdery mildew and rust are common diseases for asters which can be treated with fungicides<sup>6</sup>. To prevent mildew<sup>1</sup>, improve air circulation by providing good spacing between plants, thin out stems from crowded clumps in spring, and minimizing overhead irrigation. Commercial or home-made preventive sprays may be used<sup>5,7</sup>. It is best to choose resistant varieties as discussed earlier<sup>1</sup>.

At the end of the season, asters can be cut back to 2" off the ground in late fall after the foliage turns yellow. The whole plant can also be cut back after blooming as asters are the last ones to bloom and garden clean-up will be done soon anyway.



### References:

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