

OUR NATIVE ASTERS

By Shirley Froehlich, BSA

It's here! It's here! They shout, It's here! Every year in August and September the Asters burst into bloom to proclaim that another season has arrived. Fall is here!

What would fall be like without Asters? It certainly would be a less interesting time of year. The Goldenrods would stand alone without a dance partner, some butterflies, birds and insects would be homeless and hungry, and our fields, ditches and gardens would seem quiet, empty and bland without that familiar, final burst of colour before winter sets in. Asters are important to butterflies in several ways. First, the flowers provide lots of nectar late in the season for an assortment of adult butterflies. Second, the leaves are breakfast, lunch and dinner for Pearl Crescent butterfly caterpillars which eat only Asters. Pearl Crescents are cute, little orange butterflies with lots of dark brown markings. Asters also produce abundant seed for the birds to dine on before winter.

DESCRIPTION

There are many kinds of Asters native to North America and here in Manitoba we have 10 to 15 different wild ones. All the Asters begin blooming in August and continue throughout September unless otherwise noted. I am currently growing 6 species of Manitoba Asters. I have written a previous article about **Upland White Aster** *Oligoneuron album*, the smallest of the group so I will not discuss it further.

Western Silvery Aster *Symphotrichum sericeum* is a very pretty mound forming plant covered with violet flowers in August. The soft, silvery-green leaves are covered with dense, silvery white hairs on both sides. The leaves are 1-3.5 cm long (3/8"-1 3/8") and oblong in shape. It grows 30-50 cm tall (12"-20").

Many Flowered Aster *Symphotrichum ericoides* is an inconspicuous perennial until it breaks into bloom. Then a multitude of tiny white flowers with yellow centers adorns its many branches. The leaves are narrow, 1-5 cm long (3/8"-2") and it grows 20-60 cm tall (8"-24").

Smooth Aster *Symphotrichum leave* var. *laeve* makes the prairie fields and gardens sparkle with its abundant mauve flowers. The leaves are smooth as the name suggests and this is a good way to differentiate it from New England Aster before they begin blooming. The 2-10 cm long leaves (3/4"-4") are lanceolate, often toothed and clasping near the top of the plant. It grows 60-120 cm tall (2'-4').

New England Aster *Symphotrichum novae-angliae* is a beautiful Aster with large purple flowers with orange centers covering the top of the plant. I have noticed some variation in flower colour in my garden with some plants bearing pink flowers instead of purple. The lanceolate leaves are 3-12 cm long (1 1/4"-4 3/4") and clasp the stem. The plant grows 75-120 cm tall (2 1/2'-4').

Flattop White Aster *Doellingeria umbellatus* is a large, handsome plant with stately, white flower clusters at the top of the plant. It mixes nicely with Big Bluestem. The leaves are elliptic and 6-15 cm long (2"-6"). It grows 90-120 cm tall (3-4').

NATIVE HABITAT

Western Silvery Aster is a rare plant in Manitoba known mainly to Bird's Hill Park. Many Flowered and Smooth Asters are commonly found growing across the Canadian Prairies and into the midwestern United States. New England Aster grows in the eastern Parklands of Manitoba in places like the Prairie Preserve in Tolstoi. Flattop White Aster is found in moist woodlands throughout Manitoba. I have seen it in ditches in the Sandilands area as well as in the Whiteshell.

CULTURE

All of these species grow fairly quickly and reach full size in their second growing season. They all grow in clumps and will spread somewhat by self seeding if allowed. Western Silvery Aster requires full sun and dry to medium soil. It doesn't like wet feet. Many Flowered and Smooth Asters are both very adaptable plants tolerating a range of soil and moisture conditions, from sandy to heavy clay and dry to moist. New England and Flattop Asters grow best in full sun or part shade and moist soil. They will survive drier conditions, however the lower leaves dry off and they don't look as good as usual.

Any of the Asters can be planted in groups in flower beds or they can be mixed with other wildflowers and grasses for a prairie meadow.

You can set plants out in the garden after the danger of frost is past in spring or in summer. If you wish to grow your own plants from seed indoors they can be seeded in early March to plant out in late May. They germinate well in 3-15 days depending on the species. Seed of all species is covered lightly with media except for Many Flowered and Flattop White which seem to do better with no covering on the seed.

Fall is a wonderful time of year and our native Asters are part of it. They brighten our lives and provide a home and food for some of the creatures that we share our space with. They are a valuable addition to any garden or prairie planting. Asters, someone once said "are stars fetched from the night skies and planted on the fields of day".

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