

Forgotten Asters of Fall

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Winter is coming to an end and we're anxious to visit our local garden centers and buy the first flowering plants we see.

We adorn our own gardens with spring and summer flowering plants that are widely available at that time. They are soon buzzing with beautiful butterflies and other beneficial pollinators.

But autumn seems to be forgotten. We buy chrysanthemums to beautify our landscapes. Most are double-flowered and lack pollen to feed our native bees and insects.

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Our beautiful native asters are the perfect substitute for annual mums. Asters offer an abundance of benefits for the home garden, and by selecting different species, you can have blooms from August through November. They provide a striking display of color in shades of blue, purple, lavender, pink and white for you to enjoy when the summer flowering plants begin to fade.

Asters have very high habitat value. They support 105 species of native Lepidoptera (butterfly and moth) caterpillars, which also feed the birds. These late-season flowers offer nectar and pollen for butterflies and bees at a time when little else is blooming. Asters are an essential food source for new bumble bee queens to survive the coming winter dormancy. In addition, allowing the seedheads to remain on the plant will feed some of our song birds through winter including cardinals, chickadees, goldfinches, nuthatches, sparrows and towhees.

One of the best things about asters is how easy they are to grow. They range in height from as low as 6 inches up to 6 feet tall. They prefer moist well drained soils but are adaptable to many soil types, including our Delaware clay soils. Once established, they can withstand drought conditions. Most grow quickly by their rhizomatous and fibrous root systems making great ground covers and solving landscape issues such as eroding slopes. They can be used in borders, rock gardens or wildflower gardens. Dividing every 3-4 years will keep your plants healthy as well as increase your planting. Their seeds are dispersed by the wind which can create new colonies of asters. Pinching or cutting the tops of your larger plants by 6-8" before July 4th, will result in a bushier plant. Enrich your garden display by grouping these plants with other earlier blooming members of the aster family such as coneflowers, goldenrods, ironweeds and native sunflowers that provide the same benefits.

Asters are perennial and will return year after year providing autumn color, once again resulting in the perfect substitute for the annual mum.

To enrich your autumn display and provide ecological benefits to your garden consider the asters on the opposite page.



Symphyotrichum cordifolium (p 17)



Symphyotrichum 'Purple Dome' (p 17) and
Solidago sphacelata 'Golden Fleece' (p 16)





Symphotrichum ericoides var. *prostratum* 'Snow Flurry'
SNOW FLURRY WHITE HEATH ASTER

Typically growing 4-6" tall, this herbaceous perennial is a prostrate form of the 3' tall species. At first glance it resembles a spreading dwarf juniper with its rigid sprawling stems and notable linear, stiff leaves. Late summer to mid-autumn flowering, the yellow centered, 1/2" wide, white, star-shaped flowers cover the entire plant at peak bloom. It will tolerate some shade but prefers full sun and dry, well-drained soil. This plant is ideal for the front of the perennial border and rock gardens.

Find this aster on page 17.



Symphotrichum laeve var. *laeve* 'Bluebird'
BLUEBIRD SMOOTH ASTER

This plant, long known for its beauty and reliability, ranked as the best overall aster in a Mt. Cuba Center aster study completed in 2006. It has a neat habit, stays in a clump, and rarely requires staking. Its bluish-green foliage is clean and attractive with a slightly glossy appearance. Violet-blue flowers appear in late September through October. It mixes beautifully with *Rudbeckia fulgida*, *Helianthus angustifolius* (pictured above), and other fall-blooming perennials. This plant is one of Mt. Cuba Center's plant introductions.

Find this aster on page 17.



Symphotrichum novae-angliae
NEW ENGLAND ASTER

New England aster is one of the earliest native asters to bloom in the meadow. It has been cultivated for many years and there are a number of richly-colored cultivars from white, pink, red to deep purple. It is a long-lived and tough perennial, found in meadows and the edge of woods. It is a fine garden subject for both perennial borders and meadow plantings. It grows to 5' tall and blooms in September and October.

Find this aster on page 17.



Symphotrichum oblongifolium
AROMATIC ASTER

This low-growing aster is a great addition to the front of any border or meadow edge. The rigid, blue-green leaves, as the common name suggests, have an herbal scent when crushed. In late September and even into November, the violet-blue ray florets with yellow discs emerge to form beautiful solid mounds of flowers. Its late bloom period often gives the meadow the last show of the season.

Find this aster on page 17.