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Native plants: Northeast & Upper Midwest Asters: for Where the Sun Doesn't Shine

by Russ Bragg

The calendar says it's time to think about pumpkins and scarlet maple leaves and frost. It's also time to think about late blooming natives to extend the illusion of summer. Happily, there are several native woodland asters that will get the job done. They are the species asters found filling northeastern woodlands with great sweeps of blooms from August to October. Their easy nature and long bloom period provide a pleasing finale to the growing season.



Aster acuminatus, whorled aster. 12-30" tall, 1/2" flowers, with white rays and yellow disk. Sometimes I'm smart enough (or lazy enough) to allow "weeds" to reach the size where I can identify them. Whorled Aster volunteered in a fairly shady area of our *Aster spectabilis* nursery, which was all the reason I needed to let it grow. The gray-green toothed leaves are broadest at the base, tapering sharply to the tip. Though the leaves alternate along the stem, they are grouped so closely as to create pseudowhorls. The corymbs of flowers are held above the foliage, blooming from August into September. Grow in average soil in part to full shade

Aster cordifolius, heart-leaved aster. 24-36" tall, 1/2" flowers, pale blue rays with yellow disk. It thrives equally well in garden loam or dry gravel, taking drought in stride. Medium-green, toothed, heartshaped leaves are largely pest-free, giving a nice foliage effect through early summer. The bushy, upright form is crowned by a multitude of blossoms starting in mid-August. Part to full shade.

Aster divaricatus, white wood aster. 12-24" tall, 1/2" flowers, white rays with yellow disk. Probably the toughest of the woodland asters, it will carpet dry woods, laughing at drought and poor soil. The dark green leaves are deeply toothed and heart-shaped. The flowers create a long lasting drift of white from late August through September, accented by the dark foliage and purple-black stems. It grows in part to full shade.

Aster linarifolius, bristly aster. 6-24" tall, 1" flowers, violet rays with yellow disk. An aster for the woodland edge, where it will receive a few

Continued on page 2

Continued from page 1

hours of direct sun, it is a low grower with stiff, upright stems and whorls of 2" needle-thin leaves. It will grow in terrible soil and is often found colonizing the gravel fill along sunny roadsides. If grown towards the front of the garden, its gorgeous violet blooms won't be lost among taller plants. Blooms in September.

Aster macrophyllus, big-leaved aster. 12-40" tall, 1" flowers, white to pale lilac with yellow disk. This is one of my favorites for the woods, but not because of the flowers: large, hand-sized pale-green basal leaves form a beautiful ground cover where the big-leaved aster is allowed to colonize. Though the basal leaves appear every year, the plant doesn't always send up flowering stems. When stems do appear, they are topped by a few lovely, pale-lilac flowers. I like to think of them as a bonus to the great ground cover foliage. Big-leaved aster will grow in dry, stony New England soil, but prefers some leaf mold to hold in moisture during prolonged droughts. It blooms (when it is in the mood) late August into September.

Aster novi-belgii, New York aster. 36-54" tall, 1" flowers, violet with yellow disk. A popular garden aster, New York aster does best in full sun, but will perform well in part-shade. I have living proof; our current stock is descended from a seedling that volunteered in a fairly shady bed and blessed us with plenty of flowers and seeds. Long elliptical to lance-shaped leaves grace the upright stem beneath a cluster of rich violet flowers. Grow in

well-drained soil in as much shade as you dare. Blooms from September to October.

Aster Schreberi, 12-36" tall, 3/4 to 1" flowers, white with yellow disk. According to Gleason and Cronquist, *Manual of Vascular Plants*, it is a naturally occurring hybrid of *A. divaricatus* and *A. macrophyllus*, and in my view, it captures the best features of each. From *A. macrophyllus*, it takes its large, pale-green foliage. From *A. divaricatus*, it gets a burgundy-colored stem and numerous white flowers. So far it appears to do well in the shade of dry woods, growing in leaf litter. In a year or two, this could be my favorite aster. Blooms from August on.

Aster spectabilis, showy aster. 12-30" tall, 1-2" flowers, violet with yellow disk. This is a beautiful flowering plant for the woodland edge, in part-shade with some sun. The lance-shaped, smooth-edged leaves are a pleasing grass-green. In a colony, the basal leaves form a nice open ground cover early in the season. The showy aster is well-named, filling the September garden with large flowers whose rich violet hue is almost iridescent. It thrives in dry or well-drained soil and competes well with tree roots.

Cultural tips. All but the heart-leaved and bristly asters are strong spreaders by creeping rhizomes. They form wonderful ground covers in open woods, but may overpower the smaller garden. Keep in mind that all asters will self-seed freely.

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Reference:

Manual of Vascular Plants of Northeastern United States and Adjacent Canada, second edition. H.A Gleason and A. Cronquist, The New York Botanical Garden: 1991. ISBN 0-889327-365-1.



Continued from page 2