

Conservation Corner

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In addition to footballs, combines, and long-eared bats, another sign of the season is now taking the field in area gardens, road ditches, and prairies. Perhaps you've noticed the purples, yellows, and whites of the wildflowers creating new mosaics each day. Today we'll take a closer look at the colorful piece we know as the aster.

I'm sure many of you are familiar with asters, common herbaceous perennials that add welcome color and nectar to our fall landscape. Following molecular research during the 1990s, all but one of the many asters found in North America have been moved from the aster genus to ten other genera, all under the tribe Astereae. For now, despite their taxonomic change, asters will still be called asters.



Asters bloom from July through frost and range in size from 8 inches to 8 feet. If you look at their flowers closely, you will find a single or double set of ray florets surrounding the central cluster of tiny, yellow, tubular florets. Did you know that aster rays with their shades of blue, purple, and red feature some of the brightest colors found in nature?

Iowa's prairies and woodlands are home to several aster species. Heath or frost asters are found across North America and feature small white flowers that resemble daisy fleabane. New England asters are among our largest asters with showy purple flower heads and over 50 garden cultivars. Smooth asters feature lavender blue flowers, are very hardy, and often bloom into November. As the name suggests, they are smooth to the touch. Silky asters, also known as western silvery or mouse-eared asters, are found on dry, open prairie and woodlands and serve as an indicator species for dry or sandy prairie soil.

Native Americans use asters for both food and medicine. Many tribes eat the young, fresh leaves as greens, drink aster tea for headaches, and employ asters as a charm or "love medicine." If you suffer from arthritis, you might be interested to know that patients immersed in hot water baths in which aster leaves, stems and flowers have been soaking may experience relief.

Today asters are valued for more than just their looks and medicinal properties. Asters serve as larval host plants for the Pearl Crescent and checkerspot butterflies as well as many moths. Asters serve as late season nectar sources for pollinators including bumblebees, honeybees, Miner bees, and large Leaf-Cutting bees. Asters are also an important fall nectar source for Monarch butterflies preparing for winter trips to Mexico.

In closing, don't forget this year's Come & Go Honey Day coming up next Tuesday, Sept. 27, from 4:00 to 7:00 p.m. with a short program at 5:00 p.m. on "Pollinators in Peril." Join us as we learn more about beekeeping, honey extraction, and pollination. Perhaps one answer to how we can help our pollinators is as simple as keeping a strong and vibrant aster purple in the autumn mosaic of Pocahontas County.