

Asteraceae, Aster/Michaelmas Daisy



There are around 250 plant species of asters—annuals, biennials, perennials, and sub shrubs that can range in habitat from sunny alpine locations to moist woodlands. They are native to North America, Europe and South Africa. Asters come in sizes ranging from a compact 12-inch mound to a towering 5-foot giant. The flowers come in shades of white, lavender-blue, violet, purple, pink and red. Butterflies, bees and other nectar and pollen-seeking insects rely on the late blooming aster to give them one last feeding orgy before winter.

In North America, wild asters are roadside weeds that grow 5 to 6 feet tall and have a lanky appearance. The

European aster was much smaller and well behaved. John Trades-cant the Younger brought the North American asters from Virginia to England in 1637. The English referred to the European asters as both asters, which in Latin means star, and as starworts. Wort originally meant root. When applied to plants, that meant the plant had healing properties. The herbalist John Parkinson noted that asters were good for "the bit-ting of a mad dogge, the green herbe being beaten with old hogs grease, and applied." Starting in the 1890's, hybridization between the European and North American plants began. The English began referring to asters as Michaelmas daisies because the start of bloom coincided with The Feast of St. Michael and all the angels on September 29th.

Hybridization created the most common asters, the New England aster *A. novae-angliae* and the New York aster *A. novi-belgii*. New England asters are tall plants with flowers that close at night. The flowers have yellow centers with purple, violet or pink rays. New York asters are about a foot shorter. They have a mounding habit and come in shades of fuschia, violet, neon pink, and white. Both of these asters are readily available in nurser-ies and garden centers starting in August and September.

Culture

Asters do best in full sun in a well-drained fertile soil. Mulch around your plant and water it regularly. Divide them every two years, discarding the center woody growth and re-planting the outer new growth. When branching begins, pinch them back twice, once in the spring and again in early summer, to encourage further branching. Taller asters should be staked.

To prevent diseases, keep your asters uncrowded and in a location where they get plenty of air circulation.

References

Brickell, Christopher; Zuk, Judith D. *The American Horticultural Society A-Z Encyclo-pedia of Garden Plants*. New York: DK Publishing, Inc., 1997.

Clausen, Ruth Rogers; Ekstrom, Nicholas H. *Perennials for American Gardens*. New York: Random House, 1989.