

Return Of The Native Aster Beautifies Autumn Gardens

Perennial asters come into bloom in late summer when there is little else blooming in the perennial flower border. This is the North American native that went to England to live before returning to its native shores.

The English have a colorful name for this plant family: Michaelmas Daisy. It is a daisy and the varieties favored in England bloom around Sept. 29, St. Michael's Day.

They started out humbly from the New York and New England perennial asters. Of the 700 cultivars now known, most were developed overseas but work in Oregon and in Canada has brought into being an entirely new kind of aster plant.

The new cultivars often grow broader than high and are so covered with flowers from the ground up that you can't see the foliage.

THE INDIVIDUAL blossoms are like stars (aster is Greek for star). Others follow along until the end of September. Bloom is recurrent, and late blooming kinds will survive the first few frosts long after all the annual flowers are gone. Being North American natives, they are quite hardy so long as drainage is good.

These new perennial asters are still rare enough to bring comment from visitors. They're handled much like chrysanthemums in the garden. They like sandy soil, room to develop, and full sun. Like 'mums, their roots are shallow and vulnerable to surface cultivation. They also like a good moisture supply in summer when rains are unreliable. Unless you enjoy staking and tying, stay away from the tall-growing kinds that can reach three feet or more. There's a good selection of colors in the group under 20 inches. This includes the Royal Gem series that you can grow from seed—they were selected for their ability to come true from seed. Colors include a pale pink, a lilac blue, a white with yellow

eyes, and a medium blue.

VARIETIES include Pink Bouquet, an early and recurrent bloomer about one foot high and half again as wide. Snowball is a 10-inch white with golden centers in its daisy-like flowers. Victoria is a deep blue-purple that starts blooming in mid-August.

In contrast, Alert, close to a true red aster, starts blooming from mid-to-late September, and thus is not suitable for colder regions. Little Boy Blue is a low-growing lavender blue that is almost a ground cover.

Asters are truly perennial plants; the annual flower called aster is properly Callistephus chinensis.

To start new plants pull away new shoots each spring. If you make sure each of these "Peach cuttings" has a little piece of root attached, and plant it in another spot, it will develop into a full-sized mound and bloom that same summer.

Like chrysanthemums, these freshly-started plants seem to be more vigorous than old clumps, which tend to get woody in the center.

ASTERS will often self-seed. But don't be fooled by this seemingly easy way to get lots of new

plants. The seedlings don't have the same characteristics as the parents, and if allowed to take over will have a depressing effect on you and your garden. Keep dead flowers cut off so they won't go to seed.

Asters don't require heavy feeding but a spring application of general garden fertilizer helps. Sprinkle a tablespoonful around a newly-set-out cutting, or twice that much around an established clump.

IF RAINS FALL, asters will be far better off with a thorough soaking once every week or 10

days. A three-inch-deep mulch of peat moss will help keep weeds down and reduce the need for surface cultivation, as well as cut down on the watering necessary.

But if you do water, keep it off the leaves. Unfortunately, that is the weak spot of these plants.

Mildew fungus will badly disfigure their leaves in late August—as will the leaves of dahlias, zinnias and some roses—unless you spray them with a fungicide or an all-purpose home garden mixture.

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