



Barbara Nuffer

The Aster

By Barbara Nuffer

More than 35 species of asters grace New York's marshes, fields, swamps, forests and mountains; more even than the multitude of goldenrod species that share autumn's stellar limelight from August through October. Typical is the purple-stemmed aster (*Symphotrichum puniceum*), pictured here, growing in wet habitats across the state.

Native Americans used the aster plants medicinally making a tea to treat lung disorders, diarrhea, fevers, and arrow wounds.

The name aster comes from the Greek word "astron," meaning star, and refers to the shape of the flower. While all asters appear to have a single flower, each is actually a composite head of many separate disk and/or ray flowers, or florets. The outer, showier ray florets are fertile and are simply five petals that have all been fused together. Each of the numerous disk florets in the center produces a seed. The largest and best known example of this type of flower is the sunflower, which is also a member of the aster family, as is goldenrod.

Most of our asters have a central disk of florets that maximize cross-pollination. The showier outer ray florets contain only female parts. Since insects work from the outside to the center of the flower, these female florets are pollinated by bees carrying pollen from the previous flower head that the insect visited. As the insect works its way to the center, it picks up

new pollen from the central florets which are made up of both male and female parts. The pollen from this flower will then be carried to the next flower.

Aster flowers' reproductive purpose is to provide nectar and pollen late in the season for butterflies, moths, beetles, flies and bees. Deer and rabbits normally avoid these plants.

Irritating, hairy stems of our illustrated species are clasped by their leaves. (Easy-to-use illustrated wildflower guides ask their users to note leaf shape and attachment as well as flower head color and configuration.)

Although poisonous in large doses, some asters were used by Native Americans to make a medicinal tea to treat lung disorders, diarrhea, fevers, and arrow wounds. They also ate the cooked plant and smoked the dried root as a charm to attract game.

The contrast of lovely asters and bold goldenrods against the reds and oranges of New York's spectacular autumn foliage is truly breathtaking. So be sure to enjoy them along our trails and roads as the heat of summer gives way to fall's cool breezes.

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