

**Yard and Garden - 10-03-2015- Ted Griess / Extension Horticulture Assistant**

Currently, Rita and I, along with many other gardeners in the area, are enjoying the vibrant beauty of New England's autumn in our backyards. Allow me to clarify. This article is not about New England's colorful fall foliage, a remarkable spectacle of its own; rather, I'm writing about an herbaceous, perennial flowering plant now in full bloom and widely seen growing in many Nebraska landscapes.

Now that autumn has officially arrived, most flower borders might be looking a bit rag-tag unless they are filled with an assortment of fall flowering perennials. Such flowering perennials might include autumn joy sedum, chrysanthemum, Joe pie weed, and sweet autumn clematis; however, none can surpass the beauty of *Aster novae-angliae*, commonly called the New England aster.

Let's examine asters in general. All asters belong to the sunflower family called *Asteraceae*. In Nebraska two native species, the Heath aster and the Slender aster, can easily be found growing wild. Both are classified as weeds according to the Nebraska Department of Agriculture; however, I prefer to call them wildflowers.

What makes this group of flowers so interesting is the structure of their blossom. The blossom is daisy-like in appearance. All have yellow centers. What appears to be a single flower is actually a blossom consisting of many flowers. If one were to examine closely the center of the blossom, one would see that the center is comprised of hundreds



of individual flowers, each with its own reproductive parts and each capable of producing seed. These types are called disk flowers. The flowers on the outer margins of the blossom, appearing as petals, are also individual flowers called ray flowers.

Because of the multitude of individual flowers within a single bloom, the potential for cross pollination is enhanced. This genetic diversity is one reason why there are so many different cultivars of asters in the world.

I enjoy growing asters for their autumn color. Asters are prone to fewer diseases and insect problems than many other flowers, and they are available in a vast array of colors and sizes. Not only are they beautiful



flowers, but they attract an assortment of insects, including butterflies and bees.

The most notable colors of aster flowers consist of multiple shades of purple, lavender, and pink. Asters are generally hardy in Zones 4 through 9. They are easy to maintain and should be planted in moist, well-drained soil in full sun. The plants form broad, bushy clumps. Depending on the variety, they can range in height from twelve inches to four feet. Mature clumps should be divided in the early spring every three to four years, or in the late fall after the flowering has finished. Similar to caring for mums, pinching back the tops of the aster plants by four to six inches once or twice during the summer creates a bushier plant and helps to prolong the fall bloom. Keep in mind, this pinching must be done prior to mid July, or it will have an opposite effect, and the bloom will be greatly reduced.

If the spent flowers are not removed, they go to seed easily. As a result, I've discovered asters have a tendency to self-seed readily and often will appear at random throughout the flower border.

Although autumn has arrived and summer is quickly fading, we still have plenty of time to enjoy the vivid colors of New England—the aster that is— here in our own Nebraska backyards.