October 2016

# NATIVE NEWS

Spence Restoration Nursery

## Fuel the Monarch Migration with late-season Native Wildflowers

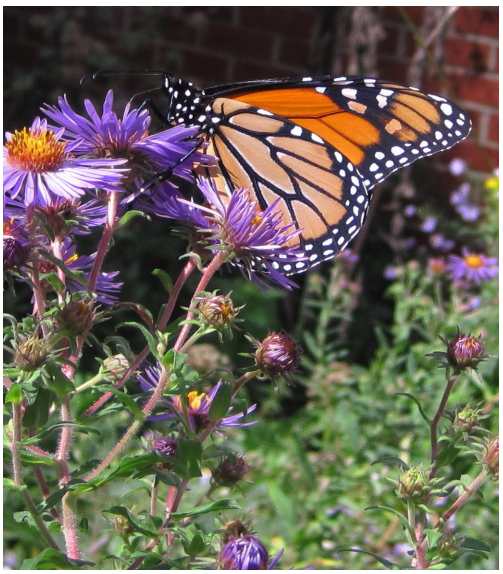
While planting milkweed is the obvious answer to helping monarchs, it is also incomplete. Milkweeds are a nectar source as well as a larval food plant, but most native milkweeds are done blooming by early August, leaving a nearly two month window until the monarchs depart for Mexico when they must utilize other nectar sources. Some of the best genera for providing nectar during this period include Eutrochium (Joe-Pye Weeds ), Vernonia (Ironweeds), Liatris (Blazing Stars), Oligoneuron (Goldenrods), and Symphyotrichum (Asters).

Joe-Pye weeds, ironweeds, and blazing stars are some of the best nectar sources in August and early September. Spotted Joe-Pye Weed (*Eutrochium maculatum*) and Hollow Joe-Pye Weed (*Eutrochium fistulosum*) are both outstanding nectar sources. A huge domed inflorescence of Hollow Joe-Pye Weed at my house once simultaneously harbored 5 tiger swallowtails and 22 bumblebees. Tall Ironweed (*Vernonia altissima*) is a very adaptable plant for almost any situation while Smooth Ironweed (*Vernonia fasciculata*) performs best in wet areas. The late-blooming blazing stars are upland species for well-drained soils. Rough Blazing Star (*Liatris aspera*) and Savanna Blazing Star (*Liatris scariosa var nieuwlandii*) are both exceptionally attractive to butterflies including monarchs.

From mid-September to early October when the last monarchs depart our area, asters and goldenrods become the primary nectar sources. Goldenrods typically peak first, around the middle of September. While all goldenrods have some pollinator value, the flat-topped species that have been reclassified to the genus Oligoneuron seem to attract the most pollinators. Riddell's Goldenrod (*Oligoneuron riddellii*) is outstanding in moist to wet situations while Stiff Goldenrod (*Oligoneuron rigidum*) is adaptable to most well-drained soils. Asters are the final vital nectar source for the monarchs as they depart. Sky-blue Aster (*Symphyotrichum oolentangiense*) and Smooth Aster (*Symphyotrichum laeve*) are both outstanding plants for well drained upland locations while Shining Aster (*Symphyotrichum firmum*) and Swamp Aster (*Symphyotrichum puniceum*) are excellent species for wet soils. Perhaps the most valuable of all the plants mentioned here is New England Aster (*Symphiotrichum novae-angliae*) which adapts to both moist and well-drained soil. Its beautiful purple flowers with yellow centers are among the most favored by monarchs and other pollinators.

## Plant Feature: New England Aster (*Symphyotrichum novae-angliae*)

No wildflower evokes a season to me more than New England Aster does fall. The cheery bright purple flowers with yellow centers are as much a part of fall as the red of sumacs and the orange of pumpkins. Fortunately this vital nectar source is very adaptable and easy to grow. In full sun, it will thrive in soil moistures ranging from well-drained to saturated. It typically grows around 4 feet in height with peak flowering at the end of September here in central Indiana. This timing coincides with the peak of the monarch migration, making it a vital fuel source for this annual spectacle.



New England Aster should be planted with other vigorous associates from the tallgrass prairie such as Yellow Coneflower (*Ratibida pinnata*), Sweet Black-Eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia subtomentosa*), and Stiff Goldenrod (*Oligoneuron rigidum*). In a restoration, New England Aster should be planted with associates from our Mesic Prairie Mix, Wet Mesic Prairie Mix, or Sedge Meadow Mix depending on the moisture levels at the site.

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