

## Asters for All Habitats

Asters are our most colorful group of fall wildflowers. Not only do they contribute immensely to the beauty of native plant communities in the fall, they are a critical late season source of nectar for pollinators. Few plants are as alive with insect activity as an aster in full bloom on a late September day. Asters inhabit all terrestrial plant communities in Indiana. While they are most obvious in meadows, and prairies, many species also inhabit wetlands and woodlands.

Asters and their close relatives the goldenrods dominate the color in meadows and prairies in late summer and early fall. In dry situations, smooth aster (*Symphyotrichum laeve*), sky blue aster (*Symphyotrichum oolentangiense*), and heath aster (*Symphyotrichum ericoides*) are commonly found in remnant prairies. Recently abandoned sites often harbor a superabundance of hairy white aster or frost aster (*Symphyotrichum pilosum*) due to its weedy nature. New England aster (*Symphyotrichum novae-angliae*) dominates moister sites in the Great Lakes region.

Wetlands are also home to several aster species as well. Sunny groundwater-fed sedge meadows often harbor the sister species swamp aster (*Symphyotrichum puniceum*) and shining aster (*Symphyotrichum firmum*). Wet old-field habitats and forested floodplains are often home to panicked aster (*Symphyotrichum lanceolatum*). Peaty wetlands provide habitat for flat-topped aster (*Doellingeria umbellata*).

Woodlands are also inhabited by a variety of asters. Moist woodlands are inhabited by side-flowering or calico aster (*Symphyotrichum lateriflorum*). Short's aster (*Symphyotrichum shortii*) and heart-leaved blue wood aster (*Symphyotrichum cordifolium*) are common denizens of mesic woodlands.

Their colorful fall flowers make asters vital for aesthetic purposes in cultivation as well as an essential source of late season nectar for pollinators. No terrestrial restoration in the Midwest is complete without them.

### Plant Feature – Side-Flowering Aster (*Symphyotrichum lateriflorum*)

Side-flowering aster is characterized by its horizontal branches that cover themselves with hundreds of small flowers. Although predominately white, some flowers are washed with purple or lavender, resulting in the other common name – calico aster. The plant typically grows 18 to 24 inches in height with an equal spread. Side-flowering aster prefers moist woodland conditions on high floodplain terraces or moist uplands. It frequently forms a delightful flowering hedge along the edges of woodlands, an effect that is easily duplicated in cultivation.

In cultivation, side-flowering aster performs best in dappled shade and moist soil. In a restoration it may be utilized with associates from our [Upland Woodland Mix](#).

