



Bethesda Community

GARDEN CLUB

"Ninety-eight Years of Brightening Lives and Landscapes"

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Send news to:
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Asters are featured in
this month's newsletter.
See pages 3-5 for infor-
mation on these iconic
fall plants.

Photo by Barbara Collier

Autumn Equinox—Beginning of the 2021-22 Meeting Year

Hello Everyone

Our 2021-2022 meeting year begins on the autumn equinox which officially starts **September 22** at 3:20PM. The day and the night are roughly equal. *Our* ZOOM meeting begins at 10:30AM with the traditional round robin when members share their gardening experiences, stories of new plants that flourished or failed, new tools and practices that improved the garden or didn't, cicadas, oak leaf itch mites that irritated, butterflies and hummingbirds that elated and birds that got sick and perished from the bird seed in our bird feeders. There's lots to share and as we've done in the past we will have a timekeeper who'll help us limit our speaking time to about 2 minutes so everyone has a chance to share.

HERE'S AN UPDATE ON OUR JANUARY 26, 2022 SPEAKER! Nancy Stevens, a Glaswegian who has retired from her job at the Royal Bank of Scotland and taken up a new career as a freelance writer and who had been chairman of her local garden club, Baldernock Garden Club for seven years, will present her ZOOM talk on the "Exceedingly Curious Tale of a Curious Herbal," a 16th-century book about medicinal plants. Nancy has herself been gardening for over 30 years. She noted that a copy of this book sold for \$25000 in 2017 at Christies, New York. Here's a chance to hear a speaker from a slightly different gardening tradition so do mark your calendars.

And finally here's a date for the **Holiday Greens Workshop** — it'll be on **Wednesday, December 15**. Patricia Pennington will provide more details as the date gets closer

A Note From Karen Fricke

Our first meeting of the season will be September 22. This and future meetings will be held virtually until further notice. St. Mark's has not opened their social hall to outside groups yet, and we will rely on their decision and CDC guidelines to decide when we can meet in person. The 2021-22 Directory/Yearbook will again be distributed by hand, so be sure and take a look at it when it arrives at your door.

2022 Spring Plant Sale News

Mary Horan

In the spring, we hope to return to our traditional in-person plant sale, open to the public. The sale will be held on May 12 at the Farm Women's Market in downtown Bethesda. This plan, of course, may evolve as the pandemic evolves, and we'll keep members updated in the newsletter and through email blasts.

Fall is a great time to check your garden for plants that could be dug and donated to the Plant Sale. Make a list of those that could be thinned, divided or dug up for the sale.

We'll continue to use the following pot sizes: medium (6-8") and large (10-12") for perennials, and any appropriate larger size for shrubs. Smaller clumps of special plants for the collector's corner can be in smaller pots (4").

When to dig plants?

Most perennials and woody plants happily overwinter in pots, if they are watered and protected from critters. Fall, therefore, is a great time to dig popular plants like coneflowers, Joe Pye weed, daylily, hosta, aster, and goldenrod. Peonies fare much better if they are dug and potted in the fall.

Please wait until spring to dig these plants: ajuga, Japanese anemone, hardy begonia, crocosmia, native salvia, Solomon's seal, plumbago and pulmonaria. In our experience, these varieties do *not* overwinter well in pots. Iris, in addition, usually prefer to be dug in the spring. If you want to divide and share hosta, digging them just as they emerge in spring makes it easier to see their structure.

If you're not sure whether a particular plant is better potted in fall or spring, please ask us.

We have quite a few members who have beautiful gardens and are happy to share with us, but are physically unable to dig and pot their donations. Please contact the committee to discuss COVID-safe assistance from volunteers.

For any Plant Sale questions, contact Judy Termini or Elaine Hope.

Welcome new member Nedra Weinstein

I have been a Chevy Chase resident for over 35 years. I have always loved gardens and enjoy visiting them every chance I can. Recently we have gotten a bit more into creating garden spaces around our house and I am interested in learning more about plants and flowers. I am from Connecticut where my grandfather, then uncle, and now my cousin, owns a beautiful farm and winery. Growing up I worked on the farm every summer. I have been in the Human Resources/ Organization Development field for over 40 years.

Two New Committees for 2021-22!

Karen Fricke

The board voted over the summer to add two new groups to our impressive list of standing committees.

The first new committee is OUTINGS, chaired by our intrepid Candy Kessel. She has organized many adventures in the past for us, but creating a standing committee dedicated to researching, planning, organizing, and leading outings near and far will allow the burden to be spread more equitably, and our club will reap the benefit of more frequent and diverse organized trips with our garden club friends. The committee wowed us with the first outing in August, to the Hillwood Cutting Gardens, where Drew Asbury led us through a fascinating walk and discussion of the strategies and practices in use. Thank you to the Outings Committee!

The second committee is a brand-new endeavor, which is called BECKY'S HOUSE. A young, vibrant, local non-profit organization called Urban Beet builds and maintains urban "farms" for homeless shelters and schools in underprivileged communities to allow them to grow some of their own produce. They reached out to our club to ask us to partner with a home-based shelter in Rockville that houses eight older women with developmental disabilities. Urban Beet has constructed five small raised beds and has asked us to manage them,

in a similar fashion to the way we manage the library landscapes. All the materials and supplies, including seeds and plants, will be provided by Urban Beet, and the caretakers and residents will maintain the gardens between our visits. Nina Stark-Slapnik has generously agreed to serve as chair and she will be reaching out to members to help her on the committee, and to all of us to assist in working the beds at Becky's House. Thanks, Nina, for expanding BCGC's efforts to serve our community through gardening!

Environmental Concerns

Barbara Collier

Asters Galore

At this time of year, the asters are coming into their own. There is a huge variety of native asters, including a large number of cultivars, selected and evaluated for their garden-worthiness by such authorities as Mt. Cuba Center (well worth consulting). My efforts with asters are much less extensive, of course. But I can share the results of my efforts with seven or eight species and cultivars, sticking to native asters common in our region.

In 2013, I planted one specimen of New England aster, *Symphotrichum novae-angliae*, in a new bed. Its numerous offspring are now beginning to bloom in my garden, their tall stalks topped with attractive clusters of violet flowers. The lower stems normally become denuded at bloom time, so putting these plants behind shorter, shrubbier ones is a good idea (they can grow to 6 ft). I find that deer tend to browse the asters they can reach, but even so, cutting them back in June is advised. Like most asters (and their fellow fall bloomers, the goldenrods), this is an important pollinator plant for the season. Unfortunately, since 2013, I have let it run rampant—a typical case of taking naive pleasure in a successful plant that then takes over the world.

Having allowed them to get out of hand, I need to start ruthlessly pulling them out after they bloom, and let other plants—including

other asters—fill in. These include heath aster, *S. ericoides*, and smooth blue aster, *S. laeve*, which I direct sowed in the same bed and are now blooming. (No doubt it will be a useful exercise of my botanical skill to avoid removing the asters I want to keep.) The heath aster is a low-growing bushy plant with small short leaves and a haze of tiny white flowers. It likes sunny, dry conditions, and in my undisciplined garden, it grows among and through other things, making attractive little drifts of white. The smooth blue aster also prefers full sun and is said to dislike crowding (note to self). With lavender blue flowers, it has upright growth, 2 to 4 feet high. Together with its smooth leaves and stem, these features help distinguish it from New England aster.



Symphotrichum oblongifolium

Photos by Barbara Collier

The aromatic aster, *S. oblongifolium*, is one of the latest to bloom. It has done well for me at the top of a small retaining wall, which makes sense, as it is said to like drier or well-drained soil. It has a shrubby mounding habit and spreads slowly by stolons, so some control may be necessary. My plants are from a cultivar called 'October Skies,' said to be "bushier and less apt to spread than the species." However, since I have moved pieces around and the hybrid does not come true to seed, I don't know if they are the parent or offspring. The flowers are generally bluish purple, but one of my clumps developed a pink spray (which I have wondered about trying to separate).

New York aster, *S. novi-belgii*, looks similar to New England aster, but is shorter and prefers damper conditions. Mine is a pleasant blue-violet and just beginning to bloom. I may not be giving it ideal conditions in my garden, though: it looks nice among black-eyed Susans in an area of partial shade, which is relatively damp but probably not optimally sunny.

For shady areas, I have three species of wood aster: heart-leaf or blue wood aster, *S. cordifolium*; white wood aster, *Eurybia divaricata*, and big-leaf wood aster, *E. macrophylla*. All spread by rhizomes and seeds, which I consider advantages in a wood aster. (I am interested in covering the ground in shady areas, especially those that are not moist.) All three tolerate dry conditions.

The most familiar of these is probably white wood aster. I think most of us with shade gardens have this plant, often acquired from fellow gardeners, as it tends to spread. I have noticed that its habit can vary quite a lot. It was so prostrate in one area that I thought it was a creeping plant, but in other exposures it can be quite upright.

Blue wood aster is similar in appearance to white wood aster, with heart-shaped leaves at the base and sprays of small leaves and flowers at the top. In my garden, it grows quite tall (4 ft) and blooms later than the white. It is not yet blooming as I write, whereas both the white wood aster and the big-leaf aster have been blooming for a while.



Eurybia macrophylla

I started growing big-leaf aster from seed when I read that it was often planted as a shady ground cover for its large leaves, said to reach 8 inches across, “rather than for the sometimes sparse fall flowers.” So I was pleasantly surprised when, having winter-sowed it in January 2019 and January 2021, my plants actually turned out to have pretty good bloom. I now have to figure out where to plant out this year’s seedlings, still in their pots—one of which managed to produce a little bloom. Encouraging!

—Barbara Collier



Lois Brown shares this photo of a magnificent Tulip Magnolia at her country home.

HORTICULTURAL NOTES

On Asters

Carole Ottesen

Asters are currently reclassified (ugh) to the genera: *Almutaster*, *Canadanthus*, *Doellingeria*, *Eucephalus*, *Eurybia*, *Ionactis*, *Oligoneuron*, *Oreostemma*, *Sericocarpus* and *Symphyotrichum*.

It's a golden afternoon under a fathomless blue sky. The gnats are gone. The temperature is 65. A canopy of tulip poplars and sycamores is filtering light, sending down shafts of gold dust. The world is heart-stoppingly beautiful. Gilding this perfection are asters in full frothy bloom.

As sunlight dances throughout the garden, it ignites scarlet leaves and the plumes of ornamental grasses and electrifies the clouds of aster flowers, irradiating each fringe of petals around its central yellow disk. No wonder the name "aster" comes from the Greek for star.

Asters celestial lightness suits the mood of the autumn garden so well that I wonder how chrysanthemums became the official fall flower, sold on every corner. Low and stolid—a tad prissy?—mums have been bred to bloom in fall-correct colors. In contrast, asters flunce in blues and purples that complement the golds and coppers of goldenrods, perennial sunflowers, and sedums and mirror the

autumn sky. They also flower in pink, white lavender, and less frequently, in vibrant shades of bright coral and ruby red.

Among an estimated 250 species in the genus *Aster*, are annuals, biennials, perennials, and even a climber (*A.carolinianus*). Most are native to North America.

Some favorites include the tall growing *Aster frikartii* 'Monch,' 30" tall with large, flat blue flowers and *Aster laevis* 'Bluebird,' 4' tall with scads of blue flowers and butterflies.

At the other end of the height spectrum is *Aster divaricatus*, a twiggy sprawler that mounds up to 18" and grows well on woodland edges and *Aster* 'Purple Dome,' the runt of the. New England aster clan.

Asters require only minimal maintenance: division every two or three years and restraint. In return, they can be counted on to shine in the autumn garden, adding sparkle to the bittersweet winding down of the year.