

## COLLECTOR'S NOTEBOOK

# New Choices for the Perennial Border

*Richard E. Weaver, Jr.*

Imagine a perennial border without summer phlox (*Phlox paniculata* cvs.), Michaelmas daisies (*Aster* cvs.), gayfeathers (*Liatris* spp.), Oswego tea (*Monarda* cvs.), sundrops (*Oenothera tetragona* and *O. fruticosa*) or butterfly-weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), and you will realize how greatly the flora of the eastern United States has contributed to horticulture. But then, take a walk through a low meadow in midsummer and count the number of spectacular plants that have not found their way into our gardens. Why have so many lovely plants been largely neglected in horticulture? Some admittedly are too vigorous or invasive, or too coarse of habit, in their wild state and must await the selection of more gardenworthy forms. But more often they are simply unavailable. Nurserymen, and most gardeners, seem unaware of the potential our native flora still offers.

I have always been a collector of rare and unusual plants, and through my writing I have tried

to introduce some of them to the gardening public. Here I would like to continue in that tradition and introduce a group of native American plants that I think would make wonderful additions to the perennial border. These are not just plants for the specialist, or plants with an esoteric beauty only appreciated by a collector. Rather, they are all easily grown and beautiful enough to be appreciated by any gardener. And they are all serviceable plants rather than novelties. All should be hardy into USDA zone 5.

Unlike annual ornamentals, which have been bred for an extended blooming season, most herbaceous perennials produce flowers for only a few weeks. Therefore, those with attractive foliage in addition to their flowers are particularly desirable for use in the perennial border. One such group is the genus *Baptisia*, of the pea family (Leguminosae), with 30 or more species distributed in the eastern and central United States. False indigo, the common name of the genus, refers to the fact that many of the species yield a blue dye, similar but evidently inferior to that produced from the true indigo, *Indigofera tinctoria*. One species of false indigo, the purple-flowered *B. australis*, is a standard component of the perennial border, but the others are virtually unknown to gardeners. The white-flowered *B. alba*, native to fields, roadsides, and woodland margins from Virginia to Florida, is particularly fine. Like *B. australis*, *B. alba* is a bushy, clump-forming plant. The grayish, finely textured foliage reaches a height of 45 to 60 cm.

The 3-cm-long flowers in a raceme up to 45 cm long rise dramatically above the foliage, and a plant in bloom stands 90 to 120 cm tall. The flowers appear in early June, a time when few other tall plants are blooming in the perennial border. The plants are at their best in full sun but will tolerate light shade without stretching or flopping.

The wild sennas, *Senna marilandica* and *S. hebecarpa* (formerly known as *Cassia marilandica* and *C. hebecarpa*), are members of a large, primarily tropical genus, which includes plants from delicate annuals to sizable trees. Readers who have visited the tropics may be familiar with the arborescent species with their showy, bright yellow flowers followed by long, cylindrical, black pods. However, the species considered here are herbaceous perennials native to much of the eastern United States. They are similar in most respects, but *S. hebecarpa* is the more floriferous, and therefore the better ornamental. *Senna hebecarpa* is really an excellent plant, better than many commonly grown perennials. At 1 m tall it is a substantial plant, almost shrubby in aspect. The pinnate foliage is attractive throughout the summer and turns a pleasing yellow in the fall. The 2 cm, bright yellow flowers, with thick brown anthers, are borne in clusters from the upper leaf axils in August. The plants do well in full sun or light shade and once planted should be left undisturbed, because the long, thick roots make transplanting hard work.

The sunflower family (Com-



*Baptisia australis*

positae) has given us many of our prized herbaceous ornamentals, both annual and perennial. In what is probably the largest of all families of flowering plants, it is not surprising that many beautiful species still await discovery by gardeners. *Aster* is a particularly neglected genus, although most gardeners are familiar with the Michaelmas daisies, which are derived from a few of our native *Aster* species. Most of the species are attractive and gardenworthy in their wild state. *Aster solidagineus* and *A. concolor* are two southeastern species: one begins the aster season and the other ends it, respectively.

*Aster solidagineus* and several closely related species are often called white-topped asters and based on several technical characteristics are sometimes segregated as the genus *Sericocarpus*. *Aster solidagineus* is a particularly neat and attractive plant. Several to many stems with narrow, 2–5 cm long leaves arise in a clump about 38 cm tall. They are topped in July with a myriad of 1 cm flower heads. The heads are unusual among *Aster* species, because the ray and disc florets are the same color and the number of rays is usually less than 10. This plant does not provide a great splash of color, but it is wonderful as a delicate accent near the front of the border. It should be grown in full sun.

*Aster concolor* is very different from *A. solidagineus*. When I first saw it, while driving along a country road near my new home last September, I did not immediately recognize it as an aster. As the 60–90 cm stems are long and

unbranched, with narrow, erect inflorescences, I took it to be a late-blooming gayfeather (*Liatris*). The color of the flower heads — pale purplish disc florets and violet rays — added to the deception (although the uppermost heads had not opened first as they do in the gayfeathers). In the garden this plant can be used much like the gayfeathers, though it is not quite so stiff and formal as those plants are. It also blooms later than the commonly cultivated *Liatris* species. The small silky-hairy leaves make the plant attractive even when it is not in bloom. Like many asters, it is best if grown in full sun.

This is just a small sampling of the many wonderful plants that await trial by gardeners. All of those discussed above are available from a few specialty nurseries, including Woodlanders, 1128 Colleton Avenue, Aiken, SC 29801, and my own, WE-DU Nurseries, Box 724, Route 5, Marion, NC 28752. Far North Gardens, 16785 Harnison Road, Livonia, MI 48154, supplies seed for some.

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