

The Daisies of Autumn

Judy Glattstein

While the fall-blooming asters and goldenrods are native to North America, they are gaining acceptance in their homeland only after domestication in Europe.

Daisies must be a very efficient kind of flower because, as the reader may or may not be aware, there certainly are a lot of them. The family Compositae (or Asteraceae) has a cosmopolitan distribution, with members in Asia, Australia, the Mediterranean, North and South America, South Africa, and Europe. Its roughly 20,000 species are dispersed into 950 genera and include such diverse examples as annuals (*Cosmos bipinnatus*), bulbs (*Dahlia coccinea*), vegetables (artichokes and lettuce), shrubs (*Artemisia tridentata*, the sagebrush of the west), and, of course, the ornamental perennials (*Achillea*, *Anthemis*, *Aster*, *Boltonia*, *Chrysanthemum*, *Chrysogonum*, *Coreopsis*, *Doronicum*, *Echinacea*, *Echinops*, *Erigeron*, *Eupatorium*, *Gaillardia*, *Helenium*, *Helianthus*, *Heliopsis*, *Liatris*, *Matricaria*, *Ratibida*, *Rudbeckia*, *Santolina*, *Senecio*, *Solidago*, *Stokesia*, and *Vernonia*—to name just a few of the more popular genera commonly grown in the herbaceous border).

There are so many members of this huge family that even taxonomists are perplexed by it. They divided the family into about a dozen tribes, simply to categorize the genera into manageable units. This classification is based upon: the presence or absence of bristles, the scales on the enlarged end of the stem that bears the flowers, the sap (whether it is milky, colored, or clear), the type of corolla, and on and on. But to a gardener, most of the compo-

sites are usually recognizable as daisies. Sometimes there are only ray flowers, as in chicory, *Cichorium intybus*, or the dandelion, *Taraxacum officinale*, and sometimes only disc flowers, as in *Santolina chamaecyparissus*. More often than not, the central group of disc flowers is surrounded by a ring of ray flowers.

The flowers of the Compositae star in American grasslands, meadows, prairies, and roadsides, creating a display worthy of the world's finest gardens. But all too often we ignore these local residents in favor of exotic imports, under the mistaken notion they are "weeds." We buy back from abroad selected cultivars of our finest natives only after they have been "domesticated" in Europe. As specific examples, contemplate the situation with regard to those glorious flowers of late summer and autumn, the Michaelmas daisies and the goldenrods.

Our Native Asters

The fall-blooming asters are important herbaceous perennials in gardens throughout England and Europe. Their English name, Michaelmas daisies, commemorates the fact that their peak bloom period occurs around the feast of St. Michael the Archangel, celebrated on September 29th. The principal parent of these showy garden cultivars is the New York aster *Aster novi-belgii*, a plant that is generally considered a weed in its native



Aster novae-angliae, from *How to Know the Wild Flowers* by Mrs. W. S. Dana. Scribner's Sons, New York, 1900

North America. Once again it is clear that the British are more appreciative of our own flora than we are.

Miss Gertrude Jekyll was fascinated with Michaelmas daisies, using them creatively in her own garden. In *Color Schemes for the Flower Garden*, published in 1908, she devotes an entire chapter to the September flower border:

There is another range of double border for the month of September alone . . . This border is mainly for the earlier Michaelmas Daisies; those that bloom in the first three weeks of the month . . . There is also, in quite another part of the garden, a later border of other Michaelmas Daisies that will follow this in time of blooming

The appeal has not diminished to this day. The Royal Horticultural Society conducted trials of Michaelmas daisies at Wisley in autumn 1990, exhibiting numerous cultivars in a diversity of color—shades of lavender, blue and purple, pink, violet and red, a few whites. Flower forms varied from those with a small golden central boss offset by long narrow petals to those with shorter petals surrounding a larger, heavy center. Petals might be arranged in a single star-like row, or fully double, or anything between. To stand on the upper level and look onto the trial grounds at this wonderful display on a September day was to appreciate what has been accomplished in England with this meadow plant from New England.

A charming garden in Wraxall, near Bristol, which I had the pleasure of visiting that same autumn, belongs to the Misses Allen and Huish. It contains the so-called National Collection of Asters. Their garden embraces a lifetime of devotion to these plants. These two women have produced a little catalogue that enumerates 240 cultivars of Michaelmas daisy, *Aster novi-belgii*. An additional section lists 38 cultivars of New England asters, *Aster novae-angliae*. To round the collection out, 48 other aster species and their cultivars are listed. By comparison, the spring 1991 catalogue of a noted mail-order nursery in north-west Connecticut lists 5 tall-growing and 4



Aster novi-belgii and *Aster tradescanti*. This drawing and all others in the article were taken from *Familiar Flowers of Field and Garden* by F. S. Mathews. G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1927

dwarf forms of *Aster novi-belgii*, 4 *Aster novae-angliae*, and 2 species of asters. Realistically, 240 cultivars of Michaelmas daisies must contain many varieties that are quite similar, or that vary by subtle differences of color, form, and habit. But surely there must be more than a dozen asters worthy of cultivation in American gardens.

Perhaps it is familiarity that breeds not so much contempt as a lackadaisical attitude. These plants enliven the late summer and autumn meadows and roadsides of New England and the prairies of the Midwest. If they grow wild, why bother to cultivate them? Unless, of course, they are British plants that we purchase at nurseries, order through the mail, or in some way describe as an "herbaceous perennial" as distinct from a "native plant."

I am not the first and certainly not alone in my plea for appreciation of our native flora. In 1914, Liberty Hyde Bailey in *The Standard Cyclopedia of Horticulture* wrote:

In North America, where the asters are such abundant plants in the autumn flora, the species are not much known as cultivated plants, most of the specimens in gardens being the wild species transplanted. In Europe, however, there are numbers of named garden kinds, some of them derived from American species that have long been cultivated there . . . The native asters are amongst the very best plants for borders and roadsides. They should be better known.

Aster novi-belgii is a variable plant that in the wild generally grows anywhere from 2.5 to 4.5 feet tall, with a multi-headed, corymbose-paniculate inflorescence, each daisy about 1 inch in diameter, with 15 to 25 rays of rich blue-violet. It spreads quickly by means of wide-ranging underground tillers. Often the center of a clump dies out, so division and replanting of an outer portion in spring every few years will provide the best-looking plants.

Cultivars exist anywhere from six inches to six feet tall, with the latter needing some kind of mechanical support. In addition, the taller varieties need to have their buds pinched two or three times a season—with the last pinch in early July. This serves two purposes: it reduces the height, and it increases branching, which results in a more floriferous display. Gardeners should fertilize these taller plants with caution, however, since too much nitrogen can result in weak stems and increase the tendency to tilt away from the vertical. I've yet to find a successful method

A Few of the Popular Cultivars of *Aster novi-belgii*

Dwarf—under 18 inches

'Buston Blue,' 6 inches, small dark-blue
'Jenny,' 12 inches, red
'Prof. Kippenburg,' 12 inches,
lavender-blue
'Snowsprite,' 15 inches, white

Dwarf—under 4 feet

'Ada Ballard,' 3 feet, lavender-blue
'Boningale White,' 3.5 feet, white
'Crimson Brocade,' 3 feet, crimson-red
'Eventide,' 3 to 4 feet, violet-blue
'Ernest Ballard,' 3 feet, reddish-pink
'Patricia Ballard,' 3 feet, rose-pink

Tall—4 feet or more

'Climax,' 5 feet, light blue
'Coombe Violet,' 4 feet, violet-purple
'Fellowship,' 4 to 5 feet, clear pink

of resurrecting toppled plants, so staking ought to be done before it becomes necessary. Generally the foliage withers on the lower portion of the stems by the time the plants bloom; therefore it is best to grow these tall asters in combination with other lower-growing, earlier-blooming plants, which will conceal their bare shanks.

I enjoy combining the taller cultivars with *Solidago* species, the tall and late-blooming *Liatris scariosa* 'September Charm,' large ornamental grasses, and other perennials with late-season ornamental effect. They can be used in a formal perennial border as did Gertrude Jekyll. Alternatively, they fit in a looser, more informal naturalistic style, now becoming popular with the desire for reduced maintenance.

The Goldenrods

Goldenrods (*Solidago* species) are even more neglected than the asters. To begin with, there

The Neglected American Plants

[The following editorial appeared 140 years ago, in the May 1851 edition of the *Horticulturist*. It was written by Andrew Jackson Downing, the father of American horticulture. More than anything else, this article reflects the depth of the inferiority complex that American gardeners have always felt about themselves and their plants in comparison to their European counterparts.]

It is an old and familiar saying that a prophet is not without honor, except in his own country, and as we were making our way this spring through a dense forest in the state of New Jersey, we were tempted to apply this saying to things as well as people. How many grand and stately trees there are in our woodlands, that are never heeded by the arboriculturist in planting his lawns and pleasure-grounds; how many rich and beautiful shrubs, that might embellish our walks and add variety to our shrubberies, that are left to wave on the mountain crag or overhang the steep side of some forest valley; how many rare and curious flowers that bloom unseen amid the depths of silent woods, or along the margin of wild water-courses. Yes, our hot-houses are full of the heaths of New Holland and the Cape, our parterres are gay with the verbenas and fuchsias of South America, our pleasure-grounds are studded with the trees of Europe and Northern Asia, while the rarest spectacle in an American country place is to see above three or four native trees, rarer still to find any but foreign shrubs, and rarest of all, to find any of our native wild flowers.

Nothing strikes foreign horticulturists and amateurs so much as this apathy and indifference of Americans to the beautiful sylvan and floral products of their own country. An enthusiastic collector in Belgium first made us keenly sensible of this condition of our countrymen . . . by telling us that amateurs and nurserymen who annually import from him every new and rare exotic that the richest collections of Europe possess, could scarcely be prevailed upon to make a search for native American plants, far more beautiful, which grow in the woods not ten miles from their own doors. Some of them were wholly ignorant of such plants,

except so far as a familiarity with their names in the books may be called an acquaintance. Others knew them, but considered them "wild plants," and therefore, too little deserving of attention to be worth the trouble of collecting, even for curious foreigners. "And so," he continued, "in a country of azaleas, kalmias, rhododendrons, cypripediums, magnolias, and nyssas—you never put them in your gardens, but send over the water every year for thousands of dollars worth of English larches and Dutch hyacinths. *Voilà le goût République!*"

In truth, we felt that we quite deserved the sweeping sarcasm of our Belgian friend. We had always, indeed, excused ourselves for the well known neglect of the riches of our native Flora, by saying that what we can see any day in the woods is not the thing by which to make a garden distinguished—and that since all mankind have a passion for novelty, where, as in a fine foreign tree or shrub, both beauty and novelty are combined, so much the greater is the pleasure experienced. But, indeed, one has only to go to England, where "American plants" are the fashion (not undeservedly) to learn that he knows very little about the beauty of American plants . . . Perhaps the finest revelation of this is the clumps and masses of our mountain laurel, *Kalmia latifolia*, and our azaleas and rhododendrons, which embellish the English pleasure-grounds. In some of the great country-seats, whole acres of lawn, kept like velvet, are made the ground-work upon which these masses of the richest foliaged and the gayest flowering shrubs are embroidered. Each mass is planted in a round or oval bed of deep, rich, sandy mould, in which it attains a luxuriance and perfection of form and foliage, almost as new to an American as to a Sandwich Islander. The Germans make avenues of our tulip-trees, and in the South of France, one finds more planted magnolias in the gardens than there are, out of the woods, in all the United States. It is thus, by seeing them away from home, where their merits are better appreciated, and more highly developed, that one learns for the first time what our gardens have lost by our having none of the "American plants" in them.

is the widespread misconception that goldenrods cause hay fever—an outright fallacy in view of the fact that plants that produce showy, colorful flowers in order to lure insect pollinators will also make heavy, sticky pollen for the insect to carry away. Fall hay fever is caused by light, wind-borne pollen produced by plants with inconspicuous flowers, such as ragweed, while plants with conspicuous flowers such as goldenrods often take the blame.

The genus *Solidago* contains about 130 species, most of which are native to North America, with a few found in Europe, Asia, and South America. They flower in summer or in autumn, are good for cut-flower use, are easily raised from seed, and can readily be propagated by division. If it sounds like a nursery's dream, I can only assume that it is the public's perception of all goldenrods as noxious weeds that eliminates their use as garden perennials. It is time to reassess the garden worthiness of goldenrods, and this is slowly happening, especially in that segment of the horticultural world interested in native plants. Perhaps other gardeners will catch up with them—and sooner rather than later.

There is tremendous variation (and consequent taxonomic confusion) within the genus *Solidago* regarding bloom time, shape of the flower head, overall height, and cultural needs. Nearly all the goldenrods have bright golden-yellow flowers, small individually, but clustered on a spiky raceme, a flat-topped corymb, or a plume-like panicle whose numerous flowers make a bright display. Following are some recommendations of species, largely unselected wild plants, valuable for their bright floral displays. Except where noted, I have chosen to follow the taxonomy presented in *Hortus III*.

Solidago altissima has the appropriate common name of tall goldenrod, as it will reach 80 inches. It has long (up to 6 inches), rough, gray leaves with hairs on the stems and the underside of the leaves. This is one species that should be pinched back to encourage stout, sturdy growth, because in its native



meadow habitat it grows among a host of other plants that provide mutual support. In the garden, it might be necessary to provide support in the form of stakes and string. This species is so vigorous that it looks better in a naturalistic setting than in a more manicured herbaceous border, and it looks particularly good in combination with tall grasses, such as the various *Miscanthus* cultivars.

Solidago bicolor is a goldenrod with, surprisingly, white rather than golden flowers, and hence its common name of silverrod. It grows two to three feet tall, with unbranched gray,

hairy stems. The blooms have creamy-white ray flowers surrounding a yellow disc, and appear from August to September. The soil in which *S. bicolor* is planted should be well drained, with only average or poor fertility. Short-lived, this species is quite possibly biennial.

Solidago caesia has several common names—wreath goldenrod, blue-stem goldenrod, and woodland goldenrod. The slender arching stems, about three feet tall, are glaucous purplish-blue. In September, the stems are wreathed with clusters of yellow flowers in the leaf axils, terminating in a loose, leafy panicle. Growing in deciduous woodlands, this species is an excellent choice for late color in the shady garden, and is easily propagated by division in the spring.

The lance-leaved goldenrod, ***Solidago graminifolia***, is unlisted in *Hortus III* but is mentioned in one of the best native plant books, *Handbook of Wildflower Cultivation*, by Kathryn S. Taylor and Stephen F. Hamblin (1963). A branching, bushy plant, this species grows two to four feet tall, with numerous, narrow, grass-like leaves. The many small, flat, clustered flower heads appear from midsummer through autumn on short branches at the top of the stem. Tolerant of a range of soil conditions, lance-leaved goldenrod will grow in wet or dry sites, and it is also easily propagated by division in spring.

The gray or old field goldenrod, ***Solidago nemoralis***, is among the earliest goldenrods to flower. Growing only one to three feet tall, this clump-forming plant has mottled, gray-green leaves. Its graceful, arching, one-sided flower stalk first appears in August, a sure sign that summer is drawing to a close. This species is somewhat short-lived, possibly biennial, and grows best on poor dry sites.

The sweet goldenrod, ***Solidago odora***, has fragrant, anise-scented foliage. Growing three to five feet tall, the one-sided panicle of flowers is attractive from late summer into



autumn. It will grow well not only in average soil, but even in poor sandy sites. The leaves can be used for tea if harvested before flowering begins, as the intensity of flavor will then decline.

Solidago pinetorum is not listed in *Hortus III* but is offered for sale in catalogues. Commonly called early goldenrod, it flowers in midsummer. The bright green foliage grows in a low clump, with a four-foot-tall, rather arching flower stalk. This species is valuable for its handsome foliage and early bloom.



Stiff-leaved goldenrod, *Solidago rigida*, has flat-topped corymbs of golden flowers in either summer or early autumn. The plants grow three to five feet tall, with yellow-green leaves as much as a foot long at the base of the plant, diminishing to four inches as they ascend the stem.

Solidago rugosa is commonly called rough-stemmed or, more accurately, rough-leaved goldenrod, since the specific name refers to the wrinkled, veiny rugose leaves. Another large goldenrod, growing four to six feet tall

or more, its spectacular flowers appear in late summer or early autumn, with curving sprays of vivid yellow flowers atop vase-shaped plants. This species appreciates moist to average soil conditions, and combines well with *Eupatorium purpureum*, Joe-pye weed, for a lovely display in wet meadows. Given its height, it is best used at the back of the border. It will seed about and "volunteer" in the garden. Division in late winter is another means of propagation.

The seaside goldenrod, *Solidago sempervirens*, has adapted to harsh coastal conditions of sandy soil and strong winds, and reveals a waxy coating on the somewhat succulent leaves. Not insistent on beach conditions, this species will grow perfectly well in average soil in the perennial border. Variable in bloom time and height, different plants can be seen in bloom from summer into October, anywhere from two to six feet high. The individual florets, large compared to most goldenrods, are carried in large flattened panicles. As this species tends to have a deep root system, especially in light soils, it is best to transplant it when small.

Solidago speciosa is also unlisted in *Hortus III*. Growing two to three feet tall, it has twelve-inch-long wands of vivid yellow flowers. Growing in average soil conditions, it also tolerates nutrient-poor sandy soils and is a good selection for xeric landscapes.

Solidago sphacelata 'Golden Fleece' cordate-leaf goldenrod, is a 1990 introduction from Mt. Cuba Center for the Study of Piedmont Flora in Delaware. Selected by Dr. Dick Lighty, the plant was discovered in a North Carolina garden where its spreading growth habit suggested its possible use as a ground-cover for large areas. The heart-shaped, semi-evergreen rosettes of leaves provide good foliage interest, with 18- to 24-inch-tall, wiry flower stems in September and October. Another of Dr. Lighty's recommended goldenrods is *Solidago flexicaulis*, which he saw in



Germany, used as a woodland groundcover in fairly heavy shade. The flowering pattern is similar to *S. caesioides*, with secondary flower clusters in the leaf axils, strung out along the stem.

There are those of us who refuse to give up gardening with the Labor Day holiday, who expect more gratification from the late season garden than planting bulbs. The dedicated gardener welcomes the display provided by our native asters and goldenrods and invites them into cultivation from the roadside, to brighten the fall of the year and to lead the garden into its winter rest.

Some Nurseries Offering a Selection of Asters and Goldenrods

Holbrook Farm and Nursery, Route 2, Box 223B, Fletcher, NC 28732

Little River Farm, Route 1, Box 220, Middlesex, NC 27557 (catalogue \$2.00)

Native Gardens, Route 1, Box 494, Greenback, TN 37742 (catalogue \$1.00)

Niche Gardens, 1111 Dawson Road, Chapel Hill, NC 27516 (catalogue \$3.00)

Prairie Nursery, P.O. Box 306, Westfield, WI 53964 (catalogue \$3.00)

Sunlight Gardens, Rt. 1, Box 6000A, Hillvale Road, Andersonville, TN 37705 (catalogue \$2.00)

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