

FLORAL FRIENDS OF WILDLIFE



As we wistfully say goodbye to summer, the September landscape offers us the cheery spectacle of asters and goldenrods in full bloom. These two members of the Asteracea family often grow side by side, for good reason: bees are attracted to the combination of purple and gold. According to botanist and author of *Braiding Sweetgrass*, “Their striking contrast when they grow together makes them the most attractive target in the whole meadow, a beacon for bees. Growing together, both receive more pollinator visits than if they were growing alone.”

Douglas Tallamy, entomologist and author, calls asters and goldenrods, as well as sunflowers, keystone herbaceous plants for attracting beneficial insects. His website homegrownnationalpark.org states, “Landscapes that do not contain one or more species from keystone genera will have failed food webs, even if the diversity of other plants is very high.” The term “food web” refers to the chain of vital connections between soil, plants, insects, birds, and mammals that keeps an ecosystem functioning.

Not only do asters and goldenrods offer critical sources of nectar and pollen to late-summer pollinators and migrating butterflies, but their foliage also feeds larvae of several insect and beetle species earlier in the season. Birds feed these nutritious caterpillars to their nestlings. Come autumn, songbirds feast on the seeds and, in winter, many beneficial insects make their winter homes in the hollow stems.

There are aster/goldenrod combinations for every garden. Not only are these plants highly adaptable to different soil and light conditions, but there are species among them that can handle the most challenging sites.

ASTERS

Depending on the species, asters can range from six inches to six feet high. They feature daisy-like arrays of petals that include white to pale blue, rose and violet, surrounding central discs of another color, often yellow. The wood asters prefer shade, while many of the others grow best in full sun. But, like the goldenrods, many of the asters will grow just about anywhere.

Note: Asters have been bred to create many cultivars (i.e., cultivated varieties), not all of which are as attractive to pollinators and birds as the straight species. One can tell when a plant is a cultivar when its nametag gives a second name in single quotes, such as New England Aster ‘Purple Dome.’ You may also see such plants identified as “nativars.”

A few of the many good aster species for residential landscapes, typically 18 inches to four feet high, include blue and white wood asters, which tolerate shade; smooth aster; calico aster; and New York Aster. The vivid-purple New England aster is dramatically tall, reaching up to six feet high, and is thus suitable for the back of the border and meadows or other naturalized areas.

GOLDENRODS

Of all the herbaceous perennials in New England, goldenrods support the most beneficial insects. Their seeds also feed many bird species.

Goldenrods have a reputation for causing hay fever, but the true culprit is ragweed, which blooms at the same time. Goldenrod pollen is sticky, requiring insects to spread it by contact. Ragweed is pollinated by the wind, which of course also blows it into our noses and eyes.

While Canada goldenrod is aggressive, many species are more appropriate for the home garden. Look for goldenrods that don't spread by rhizomes if you have limited space.

Just a few of the many goldenrods suitable for home gardeners include silverrod (or white goldenrod), which tolerates drought; blue-stemmed or wreath goldenrod, which tolerates shade; sweet goldenrod, with anise-scented foliage (a particularly important pollen and nectar source for native bees); and seaside goldenrod, which grows in sandy soil and is tolerant of drought and salt spray. It blooms late and is thus a valuable resource for migrating monarchs.

So take some time to explore these fascinating and ecologically significant plants. And give yourself the gift of several walks during this season, with a good wildflower guide in hand - and maybe one for butterflies as well. Treasure awaits your discovery.