

Native Plants for Your Garden

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White Wood Aster *Eurybia divaricata*

By Trish Beckjord

Whenever I think about gardens, I think not about spring, not about summer, but about the slow golden afternoons of fall. There is something about the richness of the color, the warm cast to the light and the explosion of whites, purples, lavenders and yellows of our asters and goldenrods that I love. Hearing the busy buzzing of the bees in chorus with the crickets and the cheeping calls of the goldfinch catching seed on the coneflower just makes me feel good!

One of my favorite asters for residential gardens is White Wood Aster (*Eurybia divaricata*). Not many years back all asters were categorized in the genus *Aster*. Now further study has separated them into other genres such as *Eurybia*, *Ionactis*, *Doellingeria* and *Symphyotrichum*. Just let me say that some things in life are never easy! But read on! You needn't worry!



The delicate white flowers of White Wood Aster are coming into bloom!

Photo: [Mt. Cuba Center](#)

White Wood Aster is one of the earliest asters to bloom. As the name indicates, this one blooms white with fewer ray flowers (florets) than is often seen with other aster species. Usually there are only approximately 6-10 'petals' per composite flower. The center disk flowers start yellow and turn rose as the flowers mature. Ray and disk flowers together are approximately one inch wide. The plant stems are somewhat crooked and are typically dark green but sometimes black. They have been described by some as "wiry." This darker stem color characteristic is more prominent in the cultivar you may see in garden centers called 'Eastern Star.'



In this photo, the possible darker stem color and rose vs. yellow disk flowers are clearly illustrated

Photo: [Perennials in Focus](#)

Several other characteristics of the species make it attractive in residential gardens. For one, it is a shorter aster topping out between 2 and 3 feet. As it matures over the summer it makes a nice tidy mound. In the wild it typically grows in partially shaded dry soils, another great characteristic that lends itself to massing under trees, on the north or east side of the house or at the edge of a shaded area where it can be easily grown in dry to medium well-drained soils. Finally, the heart-shaped toothed leaves are also attractive. As an added benefit, it is deer resistant.



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In this photo a large colony of White Wood Aster grows along a trail stairway at Hopewell Community Park in Beaver County, PA. This image gives you an idea of how this plant can be an attractive edge species in a naturalized back garden.

Photo: [Wildflowers of Western Pennsylvania](#)

One character to watch is that White Wood Aster can spread both by seed and rhizomes. This is a benefit if you want to naturalize under some trees. Think of combining it with Wild Geranium for spring flowering, Solomon's Seal, False Solomon's Seal, American Alumroot and Blue-stemmed Goldenrod. Otherwise, you can remove the seedheads before they are released to the wind. (By the way, goldenrod doesn't cause allergies. Those symptoms are brought on by ragweed, an innocuous, weedy native that blooms at the same time.)



The delicate flowers and rhizomatous character can come together to create a lovely border planting as shown in this photo. Imagine how the pollinators will thank you! Cutting the flower stems back in June will encourage this massing.

Photo: [Perennials in Focus](#)

As with all asters, White Wood Aster is an important fall nectar source for pollinators as they busily prepare for the upcoming winter season. There are several Eurybia bee specialists dependent on this genus identified in Heather Holm's [Bees: An Identification and Native Plant Forage Guide](#). Pollen and nectar also attract bumble bees, sweat bees of several types and mining bees – all native bees. Asters are a host plant for the caterpillars of the Silvery Checkerspot and Pearl Crescent butterflies. Planting these species will attract these as well as other moths and butterflies. With a mix of different aster species in your garden you could probably get color from late August when White Wood Aster starts to flower into early November.

Other aster species to consider for your garden include Heart-leaved Aster ([Symphyotrichum cordifolium](#)), New England Aster ([Symphyotrichum novae-angliae](#)) and Aromatic Aster ([Symphyotrichum oblongifolium](#)) (a later bloomer and one of my personal favorites!) These can tend to be taller than White Wood Aster but all asters can be cut back in June to create a shorter bushier appearance.

A note about cultivars: Cultivars are selections of a species or hybrids of several species that are propagated vegetatively or by tissue culture in order to maintain the preferred character.



Hence, all [Eurybia divaricata 'Eastern Star'](#) are genetically identical. The nectar or pollen value can be diminished or lost with these manipulations. Changes in leaf color can also have a negative impact. When possible, it is best to plant the native species. For more information on this question see Annie White's [How Native Plant Cultivars Affect Pollinators](#).

Remember, September is a perfect time to plant native perennials, trees and shrubs. The weather is becoming cooler and rains more reliable. If not, just remember to water new plants well on into late October/early November. And we now have two native plant nurseries in the Pittsburgh area! Many of you may know the Audubon Society of Western Pennsylvania's [Beechwood Farms Native Plant Nursery](#) in the North Hills. I've also recently visited [Arcadia Natives](#) in Washington, PA which is also a great place. Both still have inventory of native plants to purchase now so check out these links to figure out hours and directions and pay a visit!