

PER UN GIARDINAGGIO EVOLUTO ORTICOLARIO™

THE FLOWER OF ORTICOLARIO 2014
3-4-5 OCTOBER 2014 . VILLA ERBA . LAKE COMO

ASTER

Use: external
Family: *Compositae*
English name: Aster
Scientific name: *Aster*
Origin: Europe, Asia, North America

Cultivation: Easy
Exposure: full sun
Temperature: 15-25° C perennial species can even withstand -17-25° C
Watering: quite frequently
Flowering: summer and autumn (September)
Height: from 15-20 cm for dwarf types and 1.5 - 2 m for tall ones
Propagation: plant in spring
Transplantation: to the residence at the start of summer - optimal pH 5.8-6.5
Care: remove leaves and wilted or damaged flower heads
Use: for borders and rock gardens, for cut flowers for tall types

This genus, constituted by over 250 varieties, is found growing wild in three continents from Eurasia to North America

The name of the Aster genus derives from Ancient Greek and means "star flower".

The Aster has adorned the homes and gardens of our ancestors for centuries.

It was introduced by Linnaeus in 1735, but that name had already been known since antiquity. In fact, its origin dates back at least 4,000 years.

Dioscorides makes reference to the Attican aster. The term *amellus* is found for the first time in the Georgics (Book IV, 271-280) by the Roman poet Virgil (70 a.C. - 19 a.C.) and this is why the *Aster amellus* is also known as "Virgil's Aster".

The scientific name of *Aster amellus* was adopted by Carl von Linné (1707 - 1778), a Swedish biologist and writer, the father of modern scientific classification, in the publication "*Species Plantarum*" of 1753.

In Italy, it is often known as "Settembrino" because the most popular species flower in September and autumn since many species are "short day" species, meaning that they go through flower induction, like the chrysanthemum, with the shortening of the day.

Symbolism

In the meaning of flowers, the Aster is the symbol of light, love, delicacy, contentment and unpredictability but also of insecurity in relationships of love.

For the Chinese it means loyalty.

In ancient times, it was believed that the aroma of burning aster leaves chased away evil snakes. This is perhaps the reason for the presence of the Aster in many gardens.

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Another meaning relates to its emergence which occurred when the Greek goddess Astraea, looking down at the earth and feeling disgusted by the moral degradation of the human race, cried; it is therefore considered a symbol of love with mystical powers.

Asters have also been placed on the graves of French soldiers to signify that events could have unfolded differently. Another curiosity is that its name is the same in many world languages, for example, English, Swedish, Spanish, Italian, Dutch, French...

Characteristics

Asters have daisy-like flower heads with a yellow disc in most cases and ligules of various colours, according to the species and the variety from white to yellow, pink, red, blue, with intermediate shades and different tones and intensities.

The size varies considerably from 15 cm to 2 m, thus the distinction into groups based on height is important and is also a good indication for the use of these plants: for rocky gardens, dwarfs should be used, for borders, the low and medium versions, for cut flowers, the tall variety.

Aster acris is a 90 cm tall plant, growing wild in Italy, with flower heads with mauve, red or white ligules.

Aster alpinus is a dwarf species; it grows wild in central and northern Italy at altitudes of 1,500-2,000 m above sea level with 4 cm large purplish-red flowers and also in white varieties

Aster amellus or "Virgil's Aster", growing wild in Italy at altitudes below 800 m above sea level, has flower heads that are sometimes joined in corymbs, with ligulate purple flowers and also pink and bluish violet in cultivars

Aster ericoides is a North American species with white ligulate flowers which open in late autumn. The stems are branched with abundant flowering. The varieties also have pink mauve and blue flowers.

Aster farreri originates from Tibet and has large flower heads (5 cm in diameter) which flower in early summer

Aster x frikartii is a wild hybrid (*A. amellus* x *A. thomsonii*) with mauve and bright blue flower heads, which flower in late summer until October.

Aster nevae - angliae and *A. novi-belgii* are asters of American origin, the former up to 1.5 m tall, with purple violet or pink flower heads, in varieties with longer stem and larger flowers,

the latter including numerous varieties of various heights with a rich range of colours, including pink, crimson, red, white, blue and sky blue.

The tall varieties with large simple and double flower heads (5 cm and more) are used for cut flowers while the small ones with many flowers are used for borders,

Other species of some ornamental interest are: *A. thomsonii* and *A. tibeticus* of Himalayan origin, the former with blue lavender flowers and the latter with blue purple flowers in dwarf size (15-20 cm) suited for rocky gardens.

Cultivation

Asters are quite demanding plants in terms of the fertility of the soil, which must be well worked, cool, but filtering. The distances between plants vary from 30 to 60 cm. They are planted outside only after having reached adequate development in autumn or in spring. After flowering all the stems are cut in autumn. The smaller varieties are also cultivated in pots and planters. The division of plants cultivated in flowerbeds every 3-4 years helps to achieve abundant flowering.

Exposure

In full sun, otherwise they grow stunted and weak and their flowering is also compromised.

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Temperature

The species used are rustic. Hybrids are sometimes not and therefore they are treated as annuals. The optimal temperature for growth and flowering is between 15-25 °C but perennial species can even withstand -17-25 °C

Watering and Fertilising

Abundantly, but avoid water stagnation.

In the open field and in pots outdoors, perform fertigation with 150 ppm of nitrogen and potassium, or fertilise with fertilisers have an NPK ratio of 1-0,5-1.

Re-potting

For dwarf varieties cultivated in pots, re-potting is completed in spring.

Propagation

Asters are sown in spring in containers or seedbeds outdoors. The seedlings are transplanted as soon as possible into pots or containers and are then generally planted in soil at a variable distance from 20 to 30 cm from each other.

The soil should be loose and well-drained.

The plants are also divided in autumn or late winter, using robust parts with at least one bud, in suitable plots.

Grafting of detached shoots or twigs can also be done in spring.

Diseases

Powdery mildew is common, with the development on the leaves of white powder which can be combated with sulphur or specific products. Other frequent foliar fungi are Botrytis and Septoria. The wilt (*Fusarium*), which affects the lymph vessels causes death in plants, which should be removed in order to limit the infection. Disease can be reduced by planting in loose and light soil that does not hold water.

Other enemies are insects, including aphids and cutworms, nematodes of leaves, mites and slugs which are treated with special products.

Purchase guide

You should concentrate on species and varieties that resist wilting or are immune to it. According to their intended use, the size of the plants is important. The varieties deriving from *A. neviobelgii* are particularly interesting due to the wide choice they can offer in relation to shape and colour.

Research and texts by **Arturo Croci**, journalist, expert in the horticultural industry and member of Orticolario's Strategic Committee.

Texts are taken from a publication by the RHS (Royal Horticultural Society)