

Georgia aster

(*Symphyotrichum georgianum*)

For definitions of botanical terms, visit en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary_of_botanical_terms.

Georgia aster's flowers are distinguishable from other *Symphyotrichum* species by their relatively large size (up to 2 inches in diameter) and deep violet-colored ray petals. They bloom in October and November and are a magnet for bees and butterflies. In Florida, the plant occurs only in Leon County* and is a state-listed threatened species. It is also found in a few counties in Alabama, Georgia and North and South Carolina. Habitat loss and fire suppression in its native pineland and savanna ecosystems have contributed significantly to its decline.

Georgia aster's flowers are composed of up to two dozen bluish-purple ray florets surrounding a dense center of white to lavender disc florets that turn reddish-purple or tan as they mature. Flowerheads are cupped in a whorl of hairy, linear- to lance-shaped bracts. The plant's dark green leaves are dark green, oblong to lanceolate and thick with a rough surface. They may be sessile or clasping. Leaf margins are entire and tend to be revolute. Basal leaves are spatulate to obovate with entire or serrated margins. Stems are woody. Fruits are specialized achenes called cypselae.

Members of the *Symphyotrichum* genus were once classified in the genus *Aster*, which contained over 600 species. All have since been reclassified into 10 different genera. The genus name *Symphyotrichum* is from the Greek *sýmphysis*, meaning "growing together," and *thrix*, or "hair." It refers to a basal ring of hairs or bristles (pappi) thought to occur on New England aster (*Aster novi-belgii*, now *Symphyotrichum novi-belgii*); however, this characteristic is absent in most modern *Symphyotrichum* species.

Family: Asteraceae (Aster, composite or daisy family)

Native range: Leon County

To see where natural populations of Georgia aster have been vouchered in Florida, visit www.florida.plantatlas.usf.edu.

Hardiness: Zone 8A

Lifespan: Perennial

Soil: Dry, well-drained acidic sandy or clay soils

Exposure: Full sun to minimal shade

Growth habit: 1–3' tall and spreading

Propagation: Division

Garden tips: Although rare in nature, Georgia aster is propagated by several native nurseries in Florida. It is relatively easy to grow in the right conditions and adds a stunning pop of fall color to a mixed wildflower garden. The plant can be lanky, but occasional pruning during the growing season (before flowering) will encourage a denser form and more flowers. It is colonial and spreads by underground rhizomes. The plant is deciduous and dies back in winter.

Plants are occasionally available from nurseries that specialize in Florida native plants.

Visit www.PlantRealFlorida.org to find a nursery in your area.



Photo by Eleanor Dietrich