

Cultivation Notes

White Wood Aster *Eurybia divaricatus* (syn. *Aster divaricatus*)

Whorled Wood Aster *Oclemena acuminatus* (syn. *Aster acuminatus*)

Family: *Asteraceae*

By Anne B. Wagner

As the dog-days of summer arrive—that time of year when the Dog Star Sirius rises and sets with the sun and even intrepid gardeners wilt in the heat and humidity—just then White Wood Aster’s starry flowers come into bloom, fresh and bright and radiant in the shade. While most woodland wild flowers go dormant at this time or ripen seed, White Wood Aster begins a long season of bloom, edging forest trails, carpeting understory areas and sometimes sprawling over neighboring plants. The small white flowers appear delicate, but this is one tough plant, adapting to a wide range of soil and lighting conditions. In cultivation gardeners frequently refer to this prolific self-sower as “a weed,” “a bully,” “not a good companion for delicate species.”



White Wood Aster’s negative traits, however, become virtues in difficult landscaping areas. Its ability to thrive in dry shade combined with its propensity to spread makes it a prime groundcover under trees and shrubs or upon shaded slopes or along north sides of buildings. In its native habitat White Wood Aster frequently grows among Heart-leaved Aster (*Symphyotrichum cordifolius*) and Big-leaved Aster (*Eurybia macrophyllus*), plants characterized by large, coarse-textured leaves and blue or lavender flowers which bloom later than White Wood Aster.

Rick Darke in *The American Woodland Garden* features several photographs of White Wood Aster in cultivation. He recommends it as a groundcover planted with Christmas Ferns (*Polystichum acrostichoides*) and American Ginger (*Asarum canadense*.) Solomon's Seal (*Polygonatum biflorum*) and False Solomon's Seal (*Maianthemum racemosum*, syn. *Smilacina racemosa*) add architectural interest in a sea of White Wood Aster foliage, while native Columbines (*Aquilegia canadensis*) add color in spring and interesting texture all season. The plant is a natural with Low-bush Blueberries (*Vaccinium spp.*), Huckleberries (*Gaylussacia spp.*), *Rhododendron*, Mt. Laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*) or *Leucothoe spp.* In late summer Wreath Goldenrod (*Solidago caesia*) blooms attractively with White Wood Aster. Gertrude Jekyll used White Wood Aster to spill over Bergénias along garden edges. In the shady border of my own garden White Wood Aster grows behind Sedum 'Autumn Joy,' the fluffy white trusses of the Aster sprawling over and threading through the pink-flowered Sedum. Brown-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia*) would support the Aster in the same way.

But, wait, there's more! White Wood Aster also adapts to moist soils. Use it with Jack-in-the-pulpits (*Arisaema triphyllum*) and Cinnamon Ferns (*Osmunda cinnamomea*) in moist woods. For late summer appeal plant it with Great Blue Lobelia (*Lobelia siphilitica*) and the short-lived perennial Cardinal Flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*.)

Finally, include White Wood Aster as a component of butterfly gardens. It is the host plant of Pearly Crescents, one of the most widespread of North American butterflies.

Description: White Wood Aster (*Eurybia divaricatus*) is a rhizomatous plant of dry to moist woodlands, 12 to 18 inches tall with dark stems; alternate, lanceolate, acuminate, serrate leaves; starry half-inch white flowers with yellow or rose disc flowers bloom late summer; native to woods from New Hampshire south along the Appalachians, west to Ohio; zones 3-8. Whorled Wood Aster (*Oclemea acuminatus*) is similar, but sports a collar of dark green alternate leaves beneath the inflorescence. It is more common in northern New England.

Cultivation: White Wood Aster is often considered a weed in cultivation; in good soil it tends to sprawl while blooming. It thrives in a variety of soil and light conditions, but is best used in dry, shady locations. It self-sows freely and also spreads by rhizomes. To keep it in check, pinch back or shear once or twice in spring; deadhead after blooming. Rather than trying to restrain it, utilize it in difficult sites, allowing the plant to spread and fill in.

Propagation: It self-sows readily; pot up or transplant seedlings at any time during the growing season. By seed: Collect seed from at least two separate plants when the pappus is dry and fluffy. Sow immediately for germination in the spring or store dry seed in the refrigerator until it can be sown. By division: Lift a young plant, sever rhizomes; transplant or pot up.

References

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