New York Ironweed
*Vernonia noveboracensis*
A Rhode Island Native Plant
by Betsy Keiffer

Possibly the most brilliant purple of all the wildflowers, New York Ironweed can be a striking addition to a late summer wildflower garden. With a height (up to 7') as impressive as its hue, it combines well with Joe-Pye Weed, boneset, tall ornamental grasses, goldenrods, and other yellow blooms of the season. *Vernonia noveboracensis*, the species commonly found in New England, is a handsome plant with narrow, alternate, sharp-toothed leaves. Its flat-topped flower heads are made up of 30 to 50 small purple disk flowers. As the flowers age, they turn a rich golden brown that is almost as decorative as their original purple.

*Vernonia* takes its Latin name from William Vernon, an English botanist who collected plants in the New World in the 1600's. It probably derives its common name, Ironweed, from the toughness of its stem and root tissues. In *The Native Plant Primer*, Carole Ottesen recommends that root divisions be done with “an axe or a chainsaw”! On the other hand, the name Ironweed may come perhaps from its medicinal use by Native Americans as a “blood tonic”.

New York Ironweed, which grows in coastal areas from Massachusetts to Georgia and Mississippi and inland to West Virginia and Ohio, is one of at least seven *Vernonia* species in the U.S. The species interbreed in nature, producing plants with mixed characteristics. However, judging by their descriptions, none of the other species are as brilliantly colored as *V. noveboracensis*. Many more species are found in South America, Africa, and Asia.
CULTIVATION NOTES

Vernonia noveboracensis  New York Ironweed

Perennial. Brilliant purple flowers from late August to October. New York Ironweed may grow as tall as 7' on sturdy stems that don't need staking. However, if it is cut back to the ground when it is 2' tall, it will bloom at a shorter height, according to the Garden in the Woods Cultivation Guide. Vernonia prefers full sun and moist soil in the acid range. In the wild it is found beside streams, in roadside ditches, and in wet meadows, but it can thrive in sunny perennial borders if the soil is kept moist.

Propagation from seed: Nutlets containing seed can be collected in early October, or even later, as they usually stay on the plant for several weeks beyond the first frost. Vernonia has a low germination rate, so seed should be sown thickly. Before collecting, cut through a few nutlets to see if a white embryo has developed. Store seed in a sealed container in the refrigerator until planting time. Seed that is sown outdoors in a seedframe in early summer will germinate in half the time it takes seed sown in winter indoors or in a cold frame. It may take up to four years for seedlings to bloom.

Propagation from cuttings: Stem cuttings 4 - 6" long should be taken in June or July. Remove lower leaves and stick cuttings into a 50-50 mix of peat moss and sand inside a closed rooting chamber or under mist. They should be well rooted in 4 - 5 weeks.

Propagation from divisions: Dividing should be done in early spring. Put established plants in the ground when they are dormant in spring or fall.

RIWPS Policy: Never dig plants in the wild without written permission of the landowner. Take seeds sparingly.

References: