



The New England aster is queen of all late-season blooms

Purple reign

By Tim Tiner

While autumn's glory is most marked in the trees, its brightest star in meadows and fields across eastern Canada to Southern Manitoba must be the New England aster. From August to early November, the tall, profusely blooming perennial stands out both to admiring eyes and a diverse brigade of pollinators.

MINI-BLOSSOMS The lavender to deep-purple aster's loonie-sized flower head actually holds 100 to 200 individual tiny flowers. Each apparent petal is actually a single ray flower with female parts at its base. The yellow centre is a mass of minute tubular florets that produce both pollen and seeds. The Lilliputian blossoms mature in sequence, from the outer rim inwards, over one week. The whole plant may bloom for up to six weeks.

POLLINATION PILE-ON Like true petals, aster rays are alluring insect landing pads, drawing in bees of every size, wasps,

butterflies, moths, nectar-feeding flower flies, and beetles. Together with goldenrod, asters are autumn's main sustenance for all such sweet-toothed feasters.

AIRBORNE PROPAGATION Between 20 and 40 per cent of the mini-flowers are usually pollinated, and each forms a single tiny seed. Maturing within a few weeks, the seeds are borne on long tufts of white fluff and float far and wide in the breeze, though many are eaten by mice, chipmunks, grouse, chickadees, and other overwintering songbirds.

GOING TO GROUND A seed produces a low rosette of leaves in early spring and then a rising stem that may blossom the same year, though more often in the second or third year of growth. The leaves and stems die back in late fall, but the plant's short, thick rootstock can live for many years, eventually branching into three or more separate stems, which together bear dozens of flower heads every growing season. 🐛



Prairie crocus
(late spring to early summer)



Lavender hyssop
(summer)



Purple coneflower
(midsummer to early fall)



New England aster
(late summer to mid-fall)