

Three Little Known Native Composites



By Beverly Fitts

Eastern Fleabane

If you're looking for a versatile groundcover that thrives in dry shade, or in full sun for that matter, I've got one. It's the eastern fleabane, *Erigeron pulchellus* var. *pulchellus* 'Lynnhaven Carpet'. I first saw this groundcover on the edge of the camassia woodland at Chanticleer and took to it immediately. There's something irresistible about a mass of pale lavender daisies.



'Lynnhaven Carpet' closeup

Eight years ago, Joe Henderson, a section gardener at Chanticleer, gave me a piece to try. It did well in my garden from day one, so the following year I bought three more from Seneca Hill Perennials in upstate New York. I use this little composite in perennial beds, as an edger along the driveway, and as a groundcover, but I prefer it as an underplanting in my meadow. It's not a real meadow, just a mass of



'Lynnhaven Carpet' at Chanticleer

mostly native herbaceous plants such as coneflowers, switchgrass, and asters. One problem with my faux meadow was that the earth was bare in winter. 'Lynnhaven Carpet' solved the problem. Now this cold, earthy expanse is nearly covered with the semi-evergreen foliage of 'Lynnhaven Carpet'.

The unusually large, up to 4" long, and thick, fuzzy, silvery green leaves of 'Lynnhaven Carpet' create showy, 6" high, weed-

suppressing mats, making it a perfect groundcover. Around the second week in May, pale lavender, daisy-like flowers grow to about 14" tall, then fade to almost white. 'Lynnhaven Carpet' does well in full sun to part shade, average to dry soil, and thrives in dry shade. It blooms in full shade, but the flowers sweep the ground, which I find unattractive.

'Lynnhaven Carpet' spreads slowly by rhizomes and stolons, transplants, and divides easily. Divide it each fall and you can have large patches within a few years. Although it produces fluffy seedheads, I never see any seedlings. But, I'm a cautious gardener and remove most of the seedheads anyway. I advise you to do the same until we understand its seeding habits better.

Robin's plantain, another common name for this eastern fleabane, has ecological benefits.

Honey and bumble bees pollinate the flowers. Butterflies, such as the Orange Sulphur, Silvery Blue, and Pearl Crescent, find it a good nectar source, and it's also food for the larva of the Checkered White. Robin's plantain is usually disease, pest, and deer free, and according to Claudia West at North Creek Nurseries, the cut flowers last two weeks in a vase.



Erigeron pulchellus var. *pulchellus* 'Lynnhaven Carpet'

A few years ago, Charles Cresson, a fellow Longwood Gardens Instructor, told me this fleabane's history. He says this particular form of Robin's plantain was found in Clarice Keeling's garden near the Lynnhaven River in Virginia Beach. Clarice cultivated the indigenous plants on her deeply wooded lot and worked it 27 acres single-handedly into her eighties. 'Lynnhaven Carpet' is believed to

be one of those indigenous species. Like many gardeners, Clarice had a generous spirit and shared her plants with friends; some went to Dale Henderson, another woman gardener in Virginia Beach. Dale's mission was to spread rare, garden-worthy plants among as many gardeners as possible. So, she packed entire boxes with deserving varieties and sent them off to her green-thumbed friends. In 1997, two years after Clarice died, Dale passed the erigeron on to Charles Cresson. Charles traced its provenance and gave it the cultivar name 'Lynnhaven Carpet', describing its dense, carpeting habit and place of origin.

Erigeron pulchellus var. *pulchellus* 'Lynnhaven Carpet' is still little known by gardeners. But this year, the wholesaler North Creek Nurseries in Landenberg, PA is marketing it widely, so look for it at your local nursery—or drive to Gateway Garden Center in Hockessin, Delaware.

The Heartleaf Aster

Another native composite, better known but little grown, is *Symphotrichum cordifolium*. Most of us know it as the heartleaf aster or the blue wood aster. I grew it in shade on my woodland's edge for years and thought it nice, but nothing special. Then one day, I tried it in my



Symphotrichum cordifolium
scene



Symphotrichum cordifolium

quasi meadow and discovered how beautiful it could be. There, masses of misty blue flowers evoke images of old fields and lush meadows—just what I wanted.

Heartleaf aster blooms from mid-September to late October with small, light blue flowers. The blue ray flowers surround yellow disc flowers that turn a rich, red-purple during October. In shade, *S. cordifolium* is slim and spindly in habit. Give it more sun and you'd hardly recognize it. In part to full sun, this charming composite reaches 3–4' tall, puffs up proudly, and displays masses of tiny daisies on well-branched stems. Heartleaf aster enjoys average to moist soil, and, like 'Lynnhaven Carpet', tolerates dry shade. The only thing remarkable about the foliage is that it accounts for two of its common names. The heart-shaped lower leaves explain the name I use, while the small, narrow, upper leaves explain another common name—bee tongue.

Two years ago, while hiking in the Allegheny Mountains east of

Pittsburgh, I found *S. cordifolium* sprinkled down a dark, forested hillside. Last year, I saw it in part sun on flatter ground along the coastal plain of New Jersey. In fact, the heartleaf aster grows throughout the eastern United States and into parts of the midwest: sometimes white, sometimes blue, and sometimes short, sometimes tall.

Blue or white, the heartleaf aster is good for the environment. Bees, butterflies, beetles, and flies pollinate it, and it attracts wildlife—like deer. Deer nibble the foliage once or twice in spring, but tend to pass it by as the foliage matures. I don't mind—their nibbling saves me the trouble of pinching it back in June along with my other asters.

Symphotrichum cordifolium combines well with other plants, both in the garden and in arrangements. Imagine its blue daisies mixed with pink turtlehead or with lavender-pink obedient plant. Try combining it with swamp sunflower or goldenrods, like *Solidago caesia*. If you're broad-minded and enjoy a few exotic

species in your garden, plant the heartleaf aster with pink Japanese anemones or late blooming daylilies, such as *Hemerocallis* 'Autumn Minaret'.

Three good cultivars of *Symphotrichum cordifolium* are currently available: 'Avondale' is 2' tall with light blue flowers; 'Little Carlow' is 3–4' tall with slightly larger, bluer flowers; 'Chieftain' is the tallest

at 5' with pale lavender-blue flowers. The last two received the Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society. You can buy them from Digging Dog Nursery in Albion, CA.



Parthenium integrifolium
landscape

Wild Quinine

Parthenium integrifolium, sometimes called wild quinine or American feverfew, is our third little known composite. It's noticeably different from 'Lynnhaven Carpet' and *Symphotrichum cordifolium*. At a quick glance it doesn't look like a daisy at all, more like a tiny, white button.



Parthenium integrifolium closeup

Look closely and you'll see that the flower heads of wild quinine have wooly, white disc flowers surrounded by five, miniscule, white ray flowers—only the ray flowers are fertile. From late May into August the flower heads are pristine white. By September, they change to a warm ivory and by October, a soft pecan brown.

The root structure is different too. Wild quinine springs from a swollen tuberous root, not fibrous roots like the erigeron and heartleaf aster. It grows about 3' tall, with

an upright, narrow habit, and has aromatic foliage. The leaves are large, gray-green, and coarsely toothed, becoming smaller and sessile as they climb the stem. That's all very interesting if you're the techy type, but that's not why I admire this plant.

I like *P. integrifolium* because it blooms for five months and because its button-like flower heads make showier plants shine. It's the perfect companion for nearby ox-eye daisies, coneflowers, and rudbeckias. It's gorgeous with agastaches and against the red blades of *Panicum virgatum* 'Shenandoah'. Because wild quinine is a good supporting actor, I use it throughout my quasi meadow, where it has full to part sun, average to dry soil, and good drainage.

Wild quinine is not only a good companion, but like many native plants, also has medicinal uses. The Catawba Indians used its leaves for a poultice to ease burns and for a tea to cure dysentery. They rubbed its ashes onto the skin of horses to ease their sore backs. Others used it to treat fevers and colds. During the Second World War, *P. integrifolium* became a substitute treatment for malaria. Try these cures at your own risk.

I prefer to use wild quinine as a cut or dried flower. But, if I bring it indoors for arrangements, I can't watch butterflies gather its nectar or bees, wasps, and flies pollinate its flowers, and that would be a loss.

Many years ago, I bought my first wild quinine from Ellen Hornig at Seneca Hill Perennials and my second from Black Creek Greenhouses in East Earl, PA. Last year, I decided my faux meadow needed fewer species in larger drifts and wanted more wild quinine to complete the look. I shopped the local nurseries, but couldn't find it. So,



P. integrifolium & *Heliopsis* 'Summer Sun'

I turned to the Internet and located our American feverfew at Agrecol, a native plant nursery in Evansville, WI. I admit I was apprehensive about ordering online from an unknown nursery, but one day in mid-May, six robust plugs arrived, beautifully packed.

If you want to see this little known composite before you

buy it, you'll find it near the ruin at Chanticleer, in the Idea Garden at Longwood Gardens, at the High Line in New York City, and at the New York Botanical Garden.

Wild quinine, the heartleaf aster, and *Erigeron puchellus* var. *puchellus* 'Lynnhaven Carpet' are all favorites of mine. They play important roles in my quasi meadow. In winter, the erigeron foliage covers bare earth. In spring, its lavender flowers decorate the meadow. In summer, the white buttons of wild quinine compliment my pink and yellow daisies, and in fall, the heartleaf aster spreads a misty blue haze over the meadow. I've come to love these three native plants for their beauty and for the part they play in our region's ecology.



Beverly Fitts is an Instructor at Longwood Gardens and a garden lecturer and writer. As a professional harpist, Beverly performed in the US, Canada, England, and on radio and television. When a performance injury curtailed her career in music, she turned to garden design as an artistic outlet, and studied horticulture at the Arboretum School of the Barnes Foundation and at Longwood Gardens. Her articles have appeared in *Horticulture*, *Green Scene*, and the *HPS/MAG Newsletter*. Beverly enjoys photographing plants and gardens; many of her over 11,000 garden-related images have appeared in national publications.

Ed Note: The photos in this article are courtesy of the author. For a full-color version of this article, visit www.hardyplant.org.

Plant Sources

Agrecol Native Nursery

10101 N Casey Road, Evansville, WI 53536
(608) 223-3571
www.agrecol.com

Black Creek Greenhouses

211 E Black Creek Rd, East Earl, PA 17519
(717) 445-5046

Digging Dog Nursery

31101 Middle Ridge Rd., Albion, CA 95410
(707) 937-1130
<http://diggingdog.com/>

Gateway Garden Center

7277 Lancaster Pike, Hockessin, DE 19707
(302) 239-2727
www.gatewaygardens.com

Martin's Greenhouse

5489 Division Hwy, Narvon, PA 17555
(717) 354-7546