

The Joy of Weeds

Florida's Wildflowers

BUSHY ASTER

by David Hall



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Bushy aster is a pretty wildflower which needs almost no care. This herbaceous perennial is delicate in appearance and will fit into a landscape along most any border.

Bushy aster, *Aster dumosus* L., is in the aster or Sunflower Family (Asteraceae). Aster is a Greek word meaning "a star," alluding to the heads of flowers. *Dumosus* simply means bushy. The habit of growth is much branched and spreading, or sometimes quite strict.

Foliage is very narrow, long, and spreading on the lower parts of the plant. At the top the leaves become short and blunt. The upper ends of all the branches and the stalks under the flowers are covered with many of these short leaves which are all about the same size. Some plants have so many of these small leaves on the slender stems that they are wispy in appearance.

The flowers are in heads or clusters surrounded by what appear to be clusters of the same small leaves that are on the upper stem. The leaves (bracts) have a green stripe down the center bordered by white or light brown. There are actually two types of flowers in these heads. The small flowers in the center of the head are yellowish or brown and are not showy at all. The showy flowers are the ray flowers around the outside of the head. These ray flowers are strap-like, white to blue to pale lavender, and are responsible for the star-like



look. While each of these flattened, thin flowers is small, the clustered effect is quite showy. When in bloom the heads are one-third to two-thirds of an inch in diameter.

Many seeds are produced in each head, as each flower in the head has a seed. The seeds are quite small and have hairs clumped at the top. These hairs enable the seed to be carried by the wind or to be caught in the fur of passing animals. To get any germination of the seeds, they must be gathered when they are brown and the head has disintegrated so that

the seeds fall readily into your hand.

Seeds are not the best way to get plants started in your landscape, however. Bushy aster is perennial from its root system. The root system has an underground stem called a rhizome that can be moved. The best time to transplant this wildflower is during the winter. The plant would have to be spotted during the growing season because the stem freezes to the ground in the northern parts of Florida. While the underground stem does creep along under the soil, it is not especially aggressive and does not become a problem in home landscapes.

There are many growth forms of this plant. The height at time of blooming can range from two inches to four feet. Blooming is usually during the short days during the fall, but sometimes the short days in the early spring will trigger flowering. The shortest blooming plants are usually found in the spring as the plant has not had time to grow much after the winter. Some forms of the plant will have almost entirely the larger leaves usually found on only the lower plant. Other forms will have nearly all of the small, uniform leaves usually found at the top. A third leaf form with much wider-toothed blades is found at the very base of the plant. These leaves are usually in a cluster and are seen in the early spring. Normally, during the summer, these basal leaves are shed.

This species ranges southwards from Massachusetts to south Florida and west to Michigan, Arkansas, and Louisiana.

Bushy aster can be found and cultivated throughout Florida. It occurs in dry to moist habitats such as sandhills, hammocks, pinewoods, and ditches. The best flowering is found in open areas with bright sun; however, broken shade will produce good results, also. The plants will bloom in denser shade, but tend to have more foliage and fewer blooms. Borders and lawn margins make good places to plant this herbaceous shrub. It can be mowed and will survive nicely. Obviously, if mowed frequently it will not produce much top growth and will have only a few flowers close to the ground on the stunted plants.

For a fall blooming treat, plant carefree bushy aster in your landscape.