

The Joy of Weeds ————— Florida's Wildflowers

CLIMBING ASTER

by David Hall

Climbing aster is an attractive—even spectacular—wildflower. With very little care this semi-woody perennial can be used almost any place in the landscape.

Climbing aster, *Aster carolinianus* Walt., is in the Aster or Sunflower Family (Asteraceae). Aster is a Greek word meaning “a star”, referring to the star-like head of flowers. *Carolinianus* alludes to the Carolinas where this plant was first collected and named. This species ranges southwards on the coastal plain from North Carolina to south Florida. It only goes as far west as midway across the Florida panhandle and occurs in wet areas such as swamps, ditches, stream banks, glades, and marshes.

The growth habit is a sprawling shrub or low climbing or clambering vine, usually much branched, and the lowermost stems are woody. It can reach up to 12 feet in height but is usually 3 to 6 feet tall.

Flowers are in heads or clusters with a bell-shaped, bur-like green base. The small flowers in the center of the head are purple or pink and are often covered with yellow pollen. The showy flowers are the ray flowers around the outside of the head. These ray flowers are strap-like, lavender-pink to lavender and $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch long. The clustered effect of these numerous small



flowers is quite showy.

Many seeds are produced in each head, as each flower in the head has a seed. The seeds are quite narrow and $\frac{1}{8}$ inch long. The body of the seed is smooth, but plume-like hairs are clustered at the top which help seed dispersal by wind or passing animals. The best germination is obtained by gathering the seeds when they are brown and fall readily out of the head into your hand.

Seeds are only one way to get the plant started in your landscape. Climbing aster is a perennial from a thick, somewhat shortened, underground stem called a rhizome. The

root system and/or the rhizome can be transplanted. The best time to move this wildflower is during the winter. The plant dies back to the woody portions after frost in the northern part of the state and generally slows growth after blooming in the southern part. This plant is not at all aggressive and stays where it is put.

When planted in the open, the growth form is that of a diffuse bush. When put against a fence, trellis or other support it will climb by leaning and scrambling and occasionally twining. In the landscape it is a good idea to tie and train the branches along the support provided. Blooming is usually during the short days of the fall and spring with very little flowering in the spring. In areas where freezing does not occur, flowering can be all year, but the heaviest flowering is during the late fall and early winter.

It can be grown in full sunlight and full shade, with fewer blooms in each case and more foliage in the shade. The best flowering takes place when the plant is placed where it will receive direct sun for a few hours each day. Pruning after flowering will enhance growth. Even though this plant grows in the wettest of environments, it can be cultivated in any area where it can be kept moist. It does best with rich loamy soil and average to high moisture.

For sensory stimulation in the fall, plant this easy-to-grow aster in your landscape.