

November 2021 Plant of the Month



Symphyotrichum novi-belgii (L.) Nesom; New York Aster

The November *Plant of the Month* is a native perennial classified in the family Asteraceae. New York aster grows throughout New Jersey, and has a voucher specimen and record in nearly every county. The species has a FACW US Fish and Wildlife designation. It occupies moist to wet open ground, meadows, lake shores, roadsides and the edges of salt marshes (Hough,1983). The species is distributed throughout eastern North America specifically in damp thickets, meadows, and shores within 100 miles of the coast (Fernald,1950).

New York aster is one of many native asters found in New Jersey. Our *Plant of the Month* was formerly in the genus *Aster* sensu lato. However, the North American asters have been segregated from the former genus, and are now within multiple new genera. Our *Plant of the Month* is now within the genus *Symphyotrichum*. It is distinguished from other native blue asters by its tall, upright habit, its variable leaves, and the large blue flowers with widespread ray flowers. The plant's wetland habitat differentiates it from similar blue species that are wholly restricted to dry or xeric sandy soils (i.e. *S. spectabilis*). New York aster is represented in New Jersey by two varieties: the typical form that is a plant wide spread with broad leaves, whereas *S. novi-belgii* var. *elodes* is restricted to the acidic wetlands of the Outer Coastal Plain, and is well represented within the cedar swamps of the Pine Barrens. The esteemed botanist Witmer Stone did not recognize these varieties, stating the forms appear to be individual forms without constancy.

Moerman (1998) has no listings for the use of New York aster, yet many similar species have been part of the food and medicine used by Native Americans. It's use in our region has been lost to time along much of the Native lore and land uses. The *Plant of the Month* can be seen right now anywhere there is an open wet meadow or lake shore. Look for the distinct blue flowers intermixed with our native grasses and sedges.