

WHERE HAVE ALL OUR ASTERS GONE?

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Asters

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Where *have* all our asters gone? Well, the plants are still here but their scientific names have been changed. Modern taxonomists no longer place any of Saskatchewan's 16 native aster species in the genus, *Aster*; they have reclassified them into five different genera, although mostly under *Symphyotrichum*.

Numerous plant taxonomic revisions and name changes have recently been made, most in association with the ongoing Flora of North America (FNA) Project and John Kartesz' Biota of North America Project (BONAP).² Newly assigned names for many plants of the Saskatoon area were given in my recent article on the flora of Peturrson Ravine.¹ I will not try to discuss the reasons, or pros and cons, regarding the

innovations. Suffice it to say that they are generally accepted and will likely be reflected in floras and wildflower guides in the future.

What does this mean to the average naturalist? Not necessarily very much. The plants themselves remain unchanged, and we may continue using their common names as before. Scientific names have their value in "pinning down" exactly what particular plant is being referred to. This is especially important because of the multiplicity and non-standardization of plant common names. The table below summarizes the name changes for our asters and may help some readers to avoid confusion when confronted with the new scientific names.

| COMMON NAME | FORMER LATIN NAME | NEW LATIN NAME |
|-------------------------------|--|--|
| Western or Ascending Aster | <i>Aster ascendens</i> | <i>Symphotrichum ascendens</i> |
| Boreal or Bog Aster | <i>Aster borealis</i> | <i>Symphotrichum boreale</i> |
| Rayless Aster | <i>Aster brachyactis</i> | <i>Symphotrichum ciliatum</i> |
| Lindley's Blue Aster | <i>Aster ciliolatus</i> | <i>Symphotrichum ciliolatum</i> |
| Showy Aster | <i>Aster conspicuus</i> | <i>Eurybia conspicua</i> |
| Eaton's Aster | <i>Aster eatonii</i> | <i>Symphotrichum eatonii</i> |
| Many-flowered or Tufted Aster | <i>Aster ericoides</i> var. <i>pansus</i> | <i>Symphotrichum ericoides</i> var. <i>pansum</i> |
| Creeping White Prairie Aster | <i>Aster falcatus</i> var. <i>commutatus</i> | <i>Symphotrichum falcatum</i> var. <i>commutatus</i> |
| Western Willow Aster | <i>Aster hesperius</i> | <i>Symphotrichum lanceolatum</i> var. <i>hesperium</i> |
| Smooth Blue Aster | <i>Aster laevis</i> var. <i>geyeri</i> | <i>Symphotrichum laeve</i> var. <i>geyeri</i> |
| Large Northern Aster | <i>Aster modestus</i> | <i>Canadanthus modestus</i> |
| Few-flowered Aster | <i>Aster pauciflorus</i> | <i>Almutaster pauciflorus</i> |
| Purple-stemmed Aster | <i>Aster puniceus</i> | <i>Symphotrichum puniceum</i> |
| Eastern Willow Aster | <i>Aster simplex</i> | <i>Symphotrichum lanceolatum</i> var. <i>lanceolatum</i> |
| Flat-topped White Aster | <i>Aster umbellatus</i> var. <i>pubens</i> | <i>Doellingeria umbellata</i> var. <i>pubens</i> |
| White Upland Aster | <i>Aster ptarmicoides</i> | <i>Solidago ptarmicoides</i> |

1. HARMS, V.L. 2001. Vascular plants of the Petursson Ravine area along the South Saskatchewan River in Saskatoon. *Blue Jay* 59(3): 134-152.

2. KARTESZ, J.T. 1999. A Synonymized Checklist and Atlas with Biological

Attributes for the Vascular Flora of the United States, Canada, and Greenland. First Edition. In: Kartesz, J.T., and C.A. Meacham. Synthesis of North American Flora, Version 1.0. North Carolina Botanical Garden, Chapel Hill, NC.



The English called European asters both 'asters' and 'starworts.' *Aster*, Latin for 'star,' referred to the flower's star-like shape...In 1637 John Tradescant the Younger brought North American asters back from Virginia. These do not seem to have been noticed much until they were hybridized with European starworts. They were later renamed 'Michaelmas daisies' in Britain, because when the British family finally adopted Gregory XIII's revised calendar, the feast of Saint Michael coincided with their flowering....Michaelmas was always a date of beginnings: the academic year at Oxford and Cambridge, the quarterly court session, the day for debts to be settled and annual rents (often including a goose) to be paid. In the garden both Michaelmas daisies and Chinese asters bloom in autumn, magnificent curtain calls of summer but reminders too of new beginnings after winter's sleep."

- Diana Wells, *100 Flowers and How They Got Their Names*, p.7-8.