BWSR Featured Plant

Name: Smooth Blue Aster (*Symphyotrichum laeve*)

Plant Family: Asteraceae (Aster)

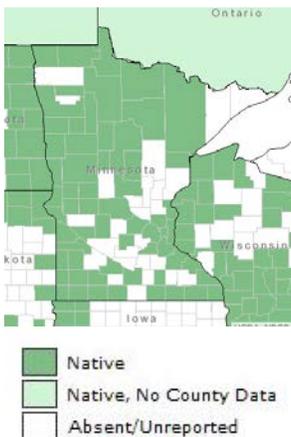Statewide Wetland Indicator Status:
- FACU

Smooth Blue Aster is a widespread species in Minnesota. Blooming from August through October, the species is an important late season source of pollen and nectar for many pollinator species. The waxy, smooth leaves that clasp its smooth stems make the species unique from other asters. Its attractive foliage and abundant flowers make Smooth Blue Aster a good addition to native gardens as well as prairie restoration, reclamation and stormwater projects.

Identification

The specie's smooth, hairless stems are light green to bluish or reddish in color and upright. It has alternating leaves that are five times longer than wide and narrow to a point. Individual flower heads are one-half to one inch across. They have yellow disk flowers in the center that darken throughout the season and are surrounded by 15-30 ray flowers that range from light to medium blue to light purple in color.

Smooth Blue Aster flowers
Image by G. D. Bebeau, Friends of the Wild Flower Garden

Range

In the United States, Smooth Blue Aster is found in every state, but is more common in the upper Midwest and Northeast regions of the country. In Minnesota, it is absent or unreported in only a few counties, mostly around central and south-central Minnesota. Found in prairies and open wooded areas, it prefers dry mesic to wet mesic conditions. It is known to be a dominate species in some quaking aspen communities.

Stem and clasping leaves
Image by Katy Chayka of Minnesota Wildflowers

Native
Native, No County Data
Absent/Unreported

Range based on University of MN Herbarium data

Grouping of flower heads
Image by Peter Dziuk of Minnesota Wildflowers

Uses

Smooth Blue Aster is a nectar and pollen source for honeybees, bumblebees, other native bees, butterflies, and skippers. Tree Sparrows and White-footed mice eat the seeds while Ruffed Grouse and Wild Turkey eat both the leaves and seeds. Various herbivores, beetles, and caterpillars feed on the foliage. With its attractive flowers and foliage, it is cultivated in flower and pollinator gardens. It is also used in prairie restoration and roadside plantings.

Primary Uses:
- Pollinator nectar/pollen source
- Native Gardens

Planting Methods
- Seed
- Containerized Plants

Planting Recommendations

Smooth Blue Aster spreads via underground rhizomes and seed. Seeds can be collected in September or early October when they are easily removed from the achenes (fruit). The seeds can be dormant seeded in the fall or kept at 35-40 degrees Fahrenheit over winter and planted in spring after the last frost. Germination takes approximately two weeks. The species is also available in containers.

Fruit of Smooth Blue Aster
Image by Katy Chayka of Minnesota Wildflowers

Similar Species

A common native aster similar in color and size to Smooth Blue Aster is New England Aster (*Symphyotrichum novae-angliae*). Its leaves are clasping but its stems and leaves are hairy. Flowers are distinguished from other asters by their multitude of rays, upwards to 100 rays per flower.
Image by Amy Workman

Image by G. D. Bebeau, Friends of the Wild Flower Garden

Sky-blue Aster (*Symphyotrichum oolentangiense*) occurs as a native species in Minnesota, found in central to southeast regions of the state. The flowers are pale blue to bright blue with 10-25 rays. The leaves are rough in texture, almost like sandpaper on both sides, are concentrated near the base and do not clasp the stem.
Image by Katy Chayka of Minnesota Wildflowers

Another blue-rayed flower (but without a yellow center) with leaves clasping the stem is Chicory (*Cichorium intybus*). It is a weedy plant, not native to Minnesota, but found in about 15 counties

References

http://www.friendsofthewildflowergarden.org, https://www.minnesotawildflowers.info, http://www.illinoiswildflowers.info, https://plants.usda.gov, https://plants.usda.gov/plantguide/pdf/pg_sylal3.pdf

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