BWSR Featured Plant

Name: Calico aster (*Symphyotrichum lateriflorum*)
Plant family: Aster (*Asteraceae*)

Like a calico cat, a calico aster has many colors. Flowers’ centers, known as disks, can be yellow to rose-purple. Flowers of different colors may bloom on one plant at the same time. Although it can grow up to 3 feet tall, calico aster can be a low-growing, flowering plant of bee lawns if it’s mowed.

Uses

Calico aster is a source of nectar and pollen for a variety of bees, wasps, flies and other insects. Caterpillars of the silvery checkerspot butterfly (*Chlosyne nycteis*) and pearl crescent butterfly (*Phyciodes tharos*) eat the leaves.

Planting Recommendations

Calico aster is best suited to partial shade and moist soils. In ideal conditions, it can form colonies from its rhizomes. In woodlands, it can appear lanky and delicate.

Range

Calico aster is native to the eastern half of the United States and adjacent Canadian provinces. In Minnesota it is generally found in all but the southwest third of the state, typically in woodlands and other habitats with partial shade and moderately moist soil.

Photo Credits: Metro Blooms

Plant Stats

STATEWIDE WETLAND INDICATOR STATUS: FACW
PRIMARY USES: Fall pollinators' food source; woodland or shaded wetland habitat enhancement

Range map source: USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service Plants Database
Calico aster, AKA side-flowering aster, differs from the rest of Minnesota’s 30-plus native aster species in that its floral disks may be yellow or purple when flowers first open. Other species may have yellow and purple disks, too, but those turn purple only after the flowers open. Flower heads are a third-inch to a half-inch wide, with eight to 16 white or pale purple rays. Disk flowers are about an eighth-inch long with deep, flaring lobes. Bracts below the heads are appressed, lance-shaped and widest at their green or purple tips. Flowers tend to grow on only one side of the branches. Calico aster blooms in late summer and early fall. The elliptic, lance-shaped or linear leaves grow up to 6 inches long and 1.5 inches wide. Leaf size decreases farther up the stem. Hairy midribs are found on the undersides. The branched stems grow 1 to 3 feet long. They’re green or red, often leaning and usually hairy.

Identification

Similar Species

Other asters with small white flowers include heath asters (Symphyotrichum ericoides) and panicled asters (Symphyotrichum lanceolatum). Only calico asters have disk flowers with deep, flaring lobes and leaves with prominent hairs on the midrib. (The hairs are visible with a magnifying lens.) Heath asters also differ in having blunt, often spreading bracts with white bases and linear leaves less than a quarter-inch wide. Panicled asters have 20 to 40 rays per flower and narrow, spreading bracts. Their leaves have short hairs only along the edges.

References

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service’s Plants Database: https://plants.usda.gov/core/profile?symbol=SYLA4
Minnesota Wildflowers: www.minnesotawildflowers.info
Illinois Wildflowers: https://www.illinoiswildflowers.info/savanna/plants/calico_aster.htm

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