

***Aster novi-belgii* – not yet ready for the great compost heap in the sky!**

Paul Picton

‘Weedy; botanically interesting; charming; very natural in appearance; attractive when planted en masse’. All have been used in descriptions of the 250 or so species of the *Aster* genus, native to Northern America, of which a very small number have been used by plant breeders to create the marvellously diverse range of hardy plants we know as Autumn Flowering Asters or Michaelmas daisies.

Aster novi-belgii is an extremely variable species from the north-eastern states of the USA and southern Canada and heads the list for botanical promiscuity. Close proximity with many other North American species planted in nineteenth century English gardens resulted in an eruption of hybrids. After a few generations of seedlings crossing with other seedlings, there emerged an



Aster novi-belgii at Old Court Nurseries.

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Fig. 1 *Aster novi-belgii*Fig. 2 *A. laevis*

identifiable race which bears the name of *Aster novi-belgii* (fig. 1) to the present day. Other important contributors included *AA. laevis* (fig. 2), *punicus*, *longifolius*, *paniculatus*, *ericoides* and *cordifolius* and the later addition by plant breeders of *A. dumosus*. Towards the end of the 19th century the first extensive collection of asters was growing in the famous Gibbs family garden at **Aldenham**, from where several of the early named varieties, including ‘Climax’, were distributed.

At the same time, in the Herefordshire village of Colwall, **Ernest Ballard** was growing drifts of Michaelmas daisies in his garden. Although very much an admirer of the graceful species and the gentle colours of the flowers adorning arching, tall stems, he saw an opportunity to improve the floral qualities of the existing hybrids. He sought to breed sturdier flowering sprays bearing larger numbers of blooms from plants with roots which did not invade the whole border within a season of growth. Ballard also considered it was important for his plants to be useful as cut flowers. In 1906 he established **Old Court**

Nurseries as trial grounds for his “new race of asters” and these quintessentially English hardy perennials are still flourishing on the same site as the mainstay of the **Plant Heritage National Collection of Autumn Flowering Asters, in the Picton Garden at Old Court Nursery at Colwall, near Malvern.**

In the early years of his breeding programme, Ernest Ballard painstakingly created deliberate crosses between selected seedlings to try to achieve the results he had in mind. However, he soon found greater success in the careful selection of large quantities of seedlings from parent ‘selfed’ plants which showed a step towards a desired colour, size of bloom, or shape of flowering spray. At the height of his work in the 1920s and 1930s, up to 5 acres of land was devoted to first-year seedlings and older plants grown on to test their garden qualities. Many other nurserymen saw the potential and reaped the benefits of the rise to universal popularity of Michaelmas daisies. However, it was always Ballard who led the way with new varieties, fully recognising the commercial importance of being ahead with his breeding.

More than 60 good cultivars originated in Colwall: the lovely ‘Marie Ballard’

(fig. 3) was selected just before his death in 1952, but was not sold until 1955 when sufficient stocks were available. It's interesting to look back at some of the earlier named varieties which led to the clean, lavender-blue rays in its superbly formal flowers. 'Climax' has precisely circular, lavender-blue flowers on tall sprays and shows much affinity with *A. laevis* in its broad foliage and stout basal shoots. 'Beauty of Colwall' (fig. 4) is an early example of Ballard's move towards flowers with a larger ray count. In the 1920s



Fig. 3 'Marie Ballard'

'Anita Ballard' (fig. 5) introduced cleaner shades of lavender blue in the rays. Through the 1930s cultivars including 'Princess Marie Louise' and 'The Sexton' (fig. 6) brought larger flowers. In the 1940s 'Plenty' showed a great improvement in both the colour and size of the flowers, in addition to having very substantial, weatherproof rays. In the early 1950s more rays increased the double effect of the flower with 'Ada Ballard' (fig. 7), though the shade of colour was sacrificed to a lilac blue. Seed, saved from 'Ada Ballard' some years before it was released for sale, produced the plant later to become 'Marie Ballard'.

Here was the most pure blue aster to date with full, double flowers as a bonus. Stems are sturdy to 1m high and the compact root clumps produce large numbers of shoots. 'Marie Ballard' must have been frequently renamed by other growers, for when we were building our collection in the 1980s, no less than 12 different 'names' from various sources all proved to be her!

The nurseries of **Jones** and the well-known **Perry's of Enfield** were notable



Fig. 4 'Beauty of Colwall'



Fig. 5 'Anita Ballard'



Fig. 6 'The Sexton'



Fig. 7 'Ada Ballard'



Fig. 8 'Rufus'

growers of asters from Edwardian times. In the 1930s **Woods** nurseries introduced the Beechwood range, the origin of most cultivars with purple-red flowers. In 1950 Ernest Ballard's introduction of 'Red Sunset' was a huge success. **Percy Picton** followed up with 'Rufus'(fig. 8) in 1956, 'Freda Ballard' in 1959, then in 1962 'Helen Ballard', the best of the purple-red shades.

In addition to Ballard (who was succeeded at Old Court Nurseries by my father, Percy Picton) other notable growers and breeders of asters through the middle years of the 20th century were

Carlile's of Twyford, Gayborder Nurseries from Melbourne in Derbyshire, **Sandford's** in East Anglia and **Baker's of Codsall**. Carlile's introduced 'Fellowship' (fig. 9) which probably has the largest flowers of any modern aster in the *novi-belgii* group – the pale pink blossoms cover generous, shapely sprays. Interestingly, the plant was raised by Sandford's, which is still remembered by the free-flowering 'Sandford's White Swan' (fig. 10). 'Percy Thrower' is another variety with spectacular, large flowers, this time with rich, lavender-blue rays. It was raised in 1958 during **Mr. R. Lidsey's** time at Gayborder Nurseries. In the early 1960s, **Mr. T. Mills** was in charge of the asters at Bakers and he introduced many of the excellent varieties, raised by **Ronald Watts**, such as heather-purple 'Coombe Rosemary' (fig. 11) and purple-red 'Janet Watts'.

George Chiswell was born in Colwall and his first job was working in the gardens at Old Colwall House for Mrs. Raynor-Wood. After the Second World War he moved to Midsomer Norton near Bath and by the 1960s was running his own nursery, growing a wide range of plants. He must have loved the memory of Ernest Ballard's fields of asters dotted around his birthplace because he raised many new varieties based on the best from Old Court Nurseries. A number of them are named after Somerset mining villages, such as the rich, purple-blue-flowered 'Gurney Slade' (fig. 12) and the soft pink 'Timsbury'. 'Priory Blush' was named after his Priory Nursery. It has graceful sprays of white flowers, flushed with pink, and is an excellent variety for cutting.

All of the cultivars mentioned so far grow 100–150cm tall. Dwarf cultivars of *A. novi-belgii* did not exist when Old Court Nurseries began, and even when the work of **Victor Vokes** and others resulted in compact varieties for the front edges of borders, Ballard usually dismissed them as being formless clumps. He must have relented on occasion because 'Snowsprite', 'Little Pink Lady' and 'Rosebud' are among the varieties he raised. 'Rosebud' is unique in having small, tightly double flowers of light pink and is just 30cm tall. It was only after the war

that the public showed much interest in short-growing asters. ‘Lady in Blue’ (fig. 13) was raised by Perry’s and introduced by Carlile’s in 1955. In the 1960s the ever popular and showy, pale pink ‘Chatterbox’ (fig. 14) was introduced by Bakers, and from **Blooms Nurseries** came sturdy 40cm ‘Jenny’ with large purple-red flowers and its twin, ‘Royal Ruby’. Records indicate ‘Jenny’ as a different plant raised by **Mr. Harrison** in 1926. In spite of the confusion, the modern ‘Jenny’ became one of the best-selling asters of all time. Dutch and German plant breeders came to the fore with many excellent dwarf cultivars: ‘Professor Anton Kippenberg’ has bright blue flowers, ‘Kassel’ bright, reddish-purple and ‘Rosenwichel’ pink flowers on low spreading clumps.

Few *novi-belgii* asters from the 1920s and 1930s grow to the useful height of around 60cm. The dwarf cultivars led slowly to the introduction of a small range of these intermediate-sized plants. **William Woods and Sons** of Taplow offered ‘Little Red Boy’ in 1946. It was bettered in 1950 by the Gayborder Nurseries introduction of ‘Winston S. Churchill’, a very bushy plant, about 70cm, with masses of bright, purple-red flowers, an instant hit with gardeners, in spite of being more prone to mildew attack than most. ‘Chequers’ (fig. 15) was raised by Gayborder Nurseries in 1953 and has really rich, violet-purple flowers.

Percy Picton raised the very last ‘Ballard’ aster, from the original strain, in 1972. This was ‘Sarah Ballard’, named after Ernest Ballard’s granddaughter. The flowers are large, full rayed, lilac purple, on plants growing to about 100cm. So far the only *novi-belgii* asters I have seen fit to add were ‘Ralph Picton’ (fig. 16) in 1991 and in 1994 ‘Marjory Ballard’, named after a Colwall lady who was a very keen gardener and the wife of one of Ernest Ballard’s nephews.

The popularity of the *novi-belgii* group spanned 70 years. Before the war, borders devoted to them were a common feature in gardens throughout the UK. It



Fig. 9 ‘Fellowship’

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Fig. 10 ‘Sandford’s White Swan’

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Fig. 11 ‘Coombe Rosemary’

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Fig. 12 ‘Gurney Slade’

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Fig. 13 'Lady in Blue'



Fig. 14 'Chatterbox'



Fig. 15 'Chequers'

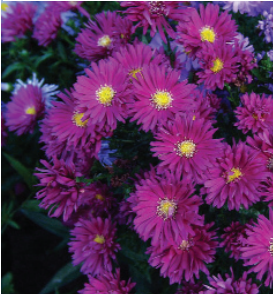


Fig. 16 'Ralph Picton'

was quite usual for these borders to be replanted each year with young stock produced from offsets, cuttings or division, the best displays coming from potted offsets, planted out in groups. The taller varieties required support from an early stage of growth and careful tying in throughout the growing season. The labour involved in such intensive growing was readily available in the days when it was possible to employ several gardeners. Regular spraying would be undertaken in the hope of curing mildew or preventing it from disfiguring the foliage. Although the range of sprays available to modern gardeners has been limited by largely unnecessary regulations, the ones we have left are effective preventatives when used properly.

Many 21st century gardens lack enough space for an aster border (or any border devoted to one genus). But a careful selection of cultivars will come up with plenty to fit into all sorts of mixed planting schemes. This same selection will give a good show of flowers from clumps divided every third year. In addition there are numerous traditional varieties to grow specifically for cut flowers, and others well suited for colourful displays in autumn containers. None will require a polytunnel or chemicals to keep its height down!

A loyal band of gardeners still plant cultivars of *A. novi-belgii*, somewhat in defiance of the current trend to make use of the increasing range of less troublesome cultivars of *A. novae-angliae* and the ever popular *A. x frikartii* 'Mönch' and several good varieties of *A. amellus*.

Many *novi-belgii* have been hybridised with small-flowered varieties, such as *A. pringlei* 'Monte Cassino', to produce a modern range of plants for the worldwide cut-flower industry. They are mostly not intended for garden planting, even if available for the purpose. This said, some of these hybrids have been successfully selected to provide plants for naturalistic and prairie planting schemes. **Piet Oudolf** is internationally renowned for his work in this style of using herbaceous perennials and *A. 'Ochtendgloren'* is one of his early

introductions. *A. novi-belgii* cultivars have also been used in the breeding of ‘dwarfed’ pot-grown asters, which are definitely not suitable for traditional garden use.

A current and promising trend in the breeding of asters for the garden involves *A. novi-belgii* and *A. cordifolius*. Developments have been inspired by Mrs. Thornely’s 1930s introduction of *A.* ‘Little Carlow’ (fig. 17), a wonderful plant combining the best characters from both parents: stout, long-lived clumps of graceful 120cm sprays of bright, lavender-blue flowers over a long season. *A. laevis* and *A. x salignus* are also being involved. It seems that, far from being consigned to the great compost heap of worthless plants, the wonderful floral qualities of *A. novi-belgii* cultivars will still have an important role to play in the future of Autumn Flowering Asters. 🌸



Fig. 17 ‘Little Carlow’

Paul Picton literally grew up among fields of Michaelmas daisies, living the year-round routine of growing the plants commercially – his father, Percy, went to Colwall to manage Old Court Nurseries for Ernest Ballard when Paul was just six. Percy Picton acquired the nursery business in 1956, and Paul joined him, later assuming control of the business in the 1970s – at the depths of the depressing period when few people wanted to buy these asters.

It was in the late 1980s when Paul’s wife Meriel told him that the time had come to revive an interest in asters. So, The Picton Garden expanded on the old aster trial grounds, and asters old and new poured in from all the remaining sources. Isabel Allen and Joy Huish were the main contributors because they wished to pass on their existing collection to ensure the future of the plants. The new collection was registered in the early years of the then NCCPG. Large, colourful borders in the old pre-war style attracted crowds of visitors and many gardening photographers. A new era for Michaelmas daisies was launched.

Paul and Meriel’s daughter, Helen, took a degree in botany and has now joined them at Old Court Nurseries (see p9)– the third generation of the Picton family to be involved in growing Autumn Flowering Asters.

For more photographs and information see www.autumnasters.co.uk

Choosing a Michaelmas daisy – Paul recommends...

‘Marie Ballard’ (fig. 3) – best shade of blue flowers. Plants live for several years without division, unless you crave the finest quality sprays. Sept. & Oct.

‘Harrison’s Blue’ – rich violet blue, flowering quality good for three seasons. Oct.

‘Priory Blush’ (fig. 18) – white with pale pink – unusual soft colours and graceful sprays ideal for flower arranging. Three years before needing division. Sept. – Oct.

‘Helen Ballard’ (fig. 19) – the best-formed and the brightest purple-red flowers. Divide annually for stronger growth and flowering stems. Late Sept.

‘Mary Deane’ – vibrant purple pink (all the rage in the 1960s), a strong-growing cultivar brings a long lasting splash of colour to autumn borders. Quite satisfactory if undivided for several years. Sept. & Oct.

‘Rosebud’ – a rather curious, ultra-compact-growing variety rarely reaching 30cm tall. Grown well, it puts on a superb display of small, fully double, button-type flowers on stiff sprays. Lovely for small flower arrangements. Best results from plants divided each spring. Sept. & Oct.

‘Lisa Dawn’ – everyone looking for a red, dwarf-growing aster wants ‘Jenny’; but I prefer the early-flowering ‘Lisa Dawn’ – 40cm tall mulberry-red flowers. Can be left in site for three years. From late Aug.

‘Remembrance’ – no one should miss out on this compact, 45cm cultivar, with large, lavender-blue flowers. Can be OK for five years but three is quite long enough. Oct.

All cultivars of *Aster novi-belgii* need an open, sunny site in fertile soil which retains moisture in the summer months. The dreaded curse of mildew is best avoided by biting the ‘green’ bullet and using a suitable preventative spray at regular intervals between late spring and flowering time. The old fashioned method of dividing the plants into individual offsets each spring and giving them plenty of space for air circulation might be helpful. Chelsea chopping is said to reduce mildew, but it may not work very well in long, dreary, cloudy summers which slow down the rate of regrowth and lead to indifferent results at flowering time.

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Fig. 18 ‘Priory Blush’

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Fig. 19 ‘Helen Ballard’