

Aster

In the middle of October, I look at my garden and I kvell. It is the only time of year it happens. It's the asters. Usually I have no beef with English, but when asters reach their glory it isn't up to the job. "Kvell" is Yiddish for your heart filling with so much delight it threatens to burst. There is a connotation of pride with a champagne fizz. Pride, in English, is always a little risky. The sort of thing it is wise to feel in extreme moderation. The slightest bit too much can push you over the edge into wickedness; without the sin of pride Shakespeare would have been stuck for tragedies. In Yiddish you can go for broke. I can't claim any credit for the asters anyway. They're as close to accidental as it's possible to get without letting the whole garden run wild, which it has an inclination to do no matter how much effort I invest in imposing order. When it comes to gardening, it's me against chaos, and chaos is winning.
– Joey Slinger, *Toronto Star*, 10-13-05

What's in a name: New England Aster. Formerly known as *Aster novae-angliae*. Now classified as *Symphotrichum novae-angliae*

All in the family: Aster family, 1314 genera; 21,000+ species

Common names in Mexico:

Estrella, Estrellita, Margarita* de monte, Hierba del burro, margarita Silvestre, Escobillo, lucerillo

Aster moranensis grows in the Mexican monarch winter reserves

♫ Tastin' away again at Margarita-ville: The common name in Spanish for daisy-like asters is *margarita*.

♫ Starry, starry sight: NC Wildflower of the Year in both 1996 & 2000

♫ Oh, yes, it's a great soil binder: A dense matted root system of many short rhizomes enables the plant to send out runners & thus spreads vegetatively.

All in the eye of the star gazer: *Subaru* is the Japanese word for Pleiades, of which the star cluster emblem is found on Subaru vehicles.

Astronomers tell us that in the Pleiades star cluster asterism, there are actually several hundred stars bound together by gravity, not just six or seven as seen by the naked eye. According to Greek mythology, the daughters of Atlas were turned into a group of stars in the constellation Taurus.



Caterpillar Café:

Common Pearl Crescent, Asteroid, Lost sallow, White dotted groundling, Northern flower moth, Painted Lady, Dark Spotted Palthis; Brown Hooded Owlet; Camouflaged Looper, Common Tan Wave, Tawny Crescent, Harris & Silvery Checkerspots; Hummingbird hawk moth; Confused eusarca; Blackberry looper and beware of the stinging Saddleback Caterpillars...

Flat-topped Asters are thought to be the sole larval food for the Harris Checkerspot butterfly.

Pulling in the petal shutters to protect the pistils at night: Disk flowers bear both female pistils and male stamens. Ray flowers bear only female pistillate flower parts. Many asters exhibit so-called sleep movements, with the ray flowers closing around the disk at night...

♫ Oh, give me a clone that forms from a rhizome. Where the bees and the butterflies can feed: While asters can clone from rhizomes, most clones live only a few years.

In the beginning: The creation myth of many Native Americans groups include stories of the Pleiades and other constellations.

Another myth-conception: The Cherokee creation story was recorded in English by US government ethnologist James Mooney in his book, *Myths of the Cherokee* in the early 1900s.

Ojibwa Indians attracted game by smoking dried aster leaves in a pipe. Meskwakis used the plant in sweat houses. The blossoms were smudged to cure a “crazy person.” Several native groups smoked these dried leaves instead of tobacco.

My name is Pearl: Associated with the Greek world for *pearl*, this *margarita* Family provides critical nectar for the survival of migrating monarchs each fall, providing the bulk of the nectar that fuels their long journey to the central highlands of Mexico in the fall. The availability of large meadows of wild asters could make the difference between their living and starving to death.

How do I love thee? Let me count the rays: Two types of flowers in an aster inflorescence: ray flowers that radiate out like rays of the sun and disk flowers usually composing the broad central area (as in the yellow center of a daisy.)

The little rascals: Noted botanist Asa Gray said of the asters: “*Never was there so rascally a genus. They reduce me to despair.*”

“What makes things baffling is their degree of complexity, not their sheer size. A star is simpler than an insect.”

– Sir Martin Rees,
in *Scientific American*