# Natives Can Be Aggressive

By Susan Camp

About fifteen summers ago, while Jim and I were still attempting to tame a very large, messy, and wildly overgrown daylily garden, I discovered a pretty plant in the daylily beds with fuzzy lavender-blue flowers and a sweet fragrance reminiscent of baby powder. I identified the plant as the annual ageratum, only it wasn't.

It was the perennial version, Conoclinium coelestinum, formerly known as Eupatorium coelestinum. This hairy-stemmed native to the central and southeastern United States is common in the Coastal Plain and Piedmont regions. With a liking for moist to wet soils, mistflower is found in old farm fields, meadows, and disturbed sites. The purplish stems bear ovoid, coarsely serrated, bright green leaves and tiny, fluffy flowers that attract butterflies.

Mistflower grows to 1 ½ to 3 feet in height with a similar spread without out any major disease or insect problems other than downy mildew or leaf miners and aphids. This perennial requires almost no maintenance other than tying it up if it flops over. It blooms from July through October.

Mistflower spreads aggressively by ropy, white rhizomes. It will soon invade all of your flower beds and borders. All you can do is keep yanking it out. This will take two or three years, and you will still find the occasional mistflower that sprouts despite your vigilance.

The descriptor we use for native plants that overrun everything else in the garden is "aggressive." The term is hardly sufficient, but "invasive" is reserved for non-natives.

While I continue to keep the memory of the mistflower affair in mind, I have been reading about other North American natives that have the potential to cause havoc in a neatly kept garden (which I cannot claim). Keep these perennials in mind when you are shopping for native plants. You may have the perfect spot that will handle a couple of rowdy growers.

False aster (Boltonia asteroides) is an eastern United States native. According to the "Digital Atlas of the Virginia Flora," false aster grows primarily in the southeastern region of the state, and in New Kent, James City, and Charles City counties.

False aster grows easily from seed and also spreads by creeping rhizomes. This perennial likes average, well-drained soil in full sun. It can reach 5 to 6 feet in height with a spread of 2 to 4 feet. It needs plenty of room to spread out, and it may need staking to prevent it from flopping over.

The erect, branching stems bear lance-shaped gray-green leaves. Tiny, white, daisy-like flowers with bright yellow centers emerge in August and September. Flower petals can be pink or purple rather than white. False aster attracts butterflies.

Like mistflower, false aster has no serious diseases or insect pests. Downy mildew can be a problem.

The third aggressive native is fireweed (Chamerion angustifolium, formerly Epilobium angustifolium), which is native to the temperate Northern Hemisphere from Alaska and Canada to the Sierra, Rocky, and Appalachian Mountains as far south as Georgia. In Virginia, fireweed is found in only a few mountain and southwest counties and occasionally in the Northern Piedmont.

That doesn't mean it won't grow in Tidewater. Fireweed grows easily in rich, well-drained soil in full sun, but needs shade in hot weather. The stiff, woody stems reach 2 to 5 feet in height at maturity with a spread of 1 to 3 feet. Narrow, oleander-like leaves grow directly from the stems. Racemes of showy, bright pink or purple flowers bloom all summer.

Fireweed is so named because it is an early colonizer of burned areas. It is also found in pastures, open fields, logged areas, and other disturbed sites. It spreads vigorously by both rhizomes and self-seeding. It has no serious problems.

It pays to research native perennials before you purchase, or you might find yourself caught in the midst of a forest of large, unruly, rampantly spreading wildflowers.

See entries in the Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Finder for more information on Conoclinium coelestinum, Boltonia asteroides, and Chamerion angustifolium.

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