

Notable Natives

False Aster

By Meredith Tucker

A tall, slender bouquet of flowers appeared in my two-year-old rain garden. The stems were strong and clustered as they rose above the lower-growing sedges and grasses. What was this plant? I had not planted it, and I didn't recognize it.

An experienced CFC volunteer identified a sample as *Boltonia asteroides recognita*, commonly known as false aster. It has become one of my favorite rain garden plants, so stately and architectural, branching and flaring in the upper half, opening to a cluster of showy white blooms. Not only does the plant resemble a bouquet of flowers in a tall, slim vase, but pollinators love it.

Its stems are hairless and slightly ribbed reaching up to five feet with leaves that are alternate and smooth as well. The stems terminate in abundant and showy groups of white flower heads. Each flower is composed of white ray florets and yellow disk florets but are occasionally pale pink or violet.

False aster prefers full or partial sun and wet to moist conditions. It can tolerate being in standing water for a short time. I can attest to that since spring, fall, and winter often find it in a puddle in my rain garden.

Pollinators love its flowers! False aster attracts many insect species because its nectar and pollen are so accessible. Visitors include both long-tongued and short-tongued bees, wasps, flower flies, butterflies, moths, and beetles while several specialist pollinators depend on *Boltonia*.

Finally, there are at least two species of false aster native to northeastern Illinois. *B. asteroides* is more common than *B. decurrens* in which the base of each leaf lies along the surface of the stem. Whichever of the of the species you find (CFC has ordered *B. asteroides* for its plant sale), I highly recommend you purchase several plants if you have the proper habitat. Think about that new rain garden you're planning; false aster is an elegant centerpiece for any wet spot.



False aster. Photo by Meredith Tucker.