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## Autumn Delights

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center



All too often, outdoor autumn décor falls to mums, hay bales, pumpkins and cornstalks. These are delightful decorating components but garden plants can offer even more color and purpose if wisely chosen. If they are not in your garden beds already, pick up some of these plants at local nurseries or think about adding them next spring for autumn color. We've been fortunate to have a rather warm start to fall so there is plenty of time for new plants to get established. Just be sure to water well.

Asters are a favorite fall bloomer for many people as well as pollinators. Mine are now covered with bees and butterflies. The blooms of the New England aster (*Symphyotrichum novae-angliae*) in pink, purple and white are fully opened now. They tend to be leggy plants unless you cut the plants back by about one-third in July. This makes for shorter plants with more blossoms. They self-seed but not over abundantly so one might find a few seedlings if spent flowers are not removed. Asters like a lot of sun and will tolerate late summer droughts once established.

The rich, royal purple blossoms of the Tatarian aster (*Aster tataricus*) open in October. These towering plants are definitely back of the border beauties. They easily reach 6 feet or more in height yet I have never had to stake them. They do spread by rhizomes so divide them every 3 years or so or give them a nice large spot to fill in. Tatarian asters are monarch magnets and the later bloom time provides needed pollen and nectar to the migrating butterflies on their journey south.

For partially shaded sites, fall blooming anemones add a delicate touch with their pink or white, single or double blossoms. The plants grow about a foot or so high but blossoms are typically held higher. After blooming, interesting seed heads form. Anemones prefer a humus-rich, moist soil and work well in woodland gardens. If they are happy, they tend to spread. In drier and sunnier sites, they may be more short-lived. My favorite white flowering cultivar is *Anemone* x. hybrid 'Honorine Jobert'. Flowers are single but profuse and have graced my white garden for many years.

I am always surprised by the number of gardeners who do not cut back their plants after bloom. When growing catmint (*Calamintha nepeta*) which blooms in early summer, always cut it back after the blooms fade for another

show of bluish flowers right about now. This plant does double duty if you encourage it. With its silvery grey foliage and billowing habit, catmint is wonderful along pathways or as a component of herb and flower gardens. Depending on which cultivar you purchase, plants range from 1 to 4 feet tall with 2 to 3 foot spreads. Note that catmint is not particularly sought after by deer.

Boltonias (*Boltonia asteroides*) are also a key flowering plant for autumn days and another lure for pollinators. Plants easily strive for 6 feet plus heights but can be kept at about 4 to 5 feet if cut back by one-third in July. Some of the cultivars are shorter but these plants are most glorious if placed at the back of the border or in spots where they can moderately be contained. If they are not cut back in July, anticipate that they will need staking most Septembers. Boltonias also spread by rhizomes so plan on dividing every few years. The species and a number of cultivars, like 'Snowbank' sport white flowers but a few named cultivars can be purchased that produce pink flowers.

Sedums, in particular *Sedum telephium* 'Autumn Joy' and *S. sieboldii* (renamed *Hylotelephium sieboldi*) are two wonderful sedums for the fall flowering garden. The latter is sometimes referred to as October daphne and is grown for its perfectly rounded clump of delicate arching stems. The flowers start out a mauve and turn deeper pink as the temperatures drop. Round, blue-green leaves are edged with pink and the plant is deer resistant.

'Autumn Joy' has been a mainstay in gardens for a while now because it is long-lived, dependable and also attracts loads of butterflies. The pink flowers start opening usually in late August and will stay decent looking until November as they slowly fade to a dark rust color. Plants get about 2 feet high and wide and will tolerate dry conditions. If your plant gets floppy and it is in full sun that usually means it is time to divide it. Do so next spring.

Not all fall bloomers are perennials. Snapdragons will bloom from early summer through to a heavy frost if watered, fertilized and the spent flowers are removed. Leave a few seed heads to form, however, as often they will reseed themselves giving you more plants for next year. Pansies and violas also enjoy the cool fall weather and often reseed themselves and pop up in the most unexpected places.

Fall color can be found in many plants. Make a note of which ones you are admiring now and add some to expand your yard's color palette. For information on growing any of the above plants or on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at [www.ladybug.uconn.edu](http://www.ladybug.uconn.edu) or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.