

Late summer/early fall flowering

By Jennifer Thompson

As winter-like weather sets in Wyoming gardeners find themselves assessing how the flowering plants in their landscapes performed during the year. For those interested in pollinator health, some time considering the importance of late-blooming plants in the landscape can be time well spent.

Having flowers that provide pollen, nectar, or other resources for pollinators is important through most of our growing season, but late summer/early fall can be an especially important time for some pollinators.

As summer fades away, many bumble bee species are busy producing new queens for the next year. Late-blooming flowers are a favorite spot for these new queen bees. They busily feed, trying to build up their energy reserves before they enter hibernacula, chambers they have dug into the earth. In the soil, the queens are protected from temperature extremes and will go dormant to wait out winter. They need plenty of energy to survive winter and get off to a good start in spring.

Planting late-blooming plants can provide resources to these bees and other pollinators making a last dash to the end of the growing season. There are a variety of plants to choose from; I'll just cover a few here.

Hyssop (*Agastache* spp.) – Hyssops are in the mint family of plants. Along with their square stems (in cross section), which are usually found in plants in this family, they also often have a noticeable fragrance when leaves are rubbed together

(some have been described as smelling like licorice, root beer, bubble gum or just minty, depending on the species). Hyssops generally grow as upright clumps and don't tend to spread rapidly by rhizomes (underground) as do others in the mint family (peppermint, spearmint, etc.), although many mints reproduce by seed as well. Different species have different types of flowers – some agastaches have red/orange-colored tubular flowers that are very attractive to hummingbirds (*Agastache rupestris* and *Agastache cana*); others have shorter blue/purple flowers that tend to be very attractive to bees such as bumble bees (*Agastache foeniculum*).

Cold tolerance is one of the main characteristics to pay attention to when shopping for hyssops in Wyoming. Some of the agastaches in the horticultural trade aren't quite cold hardy enough to consistently make it through our tough Wyoming winters at higher elevations, so pay attention to those USDA cold hardiness ratings. *Agastache foeniculum* is one of the tougher species and is native to our state. Agastache 'Blue Fortune' is one variety that grows well (but appreciates a little more water than some of the orange tubular-flowered agastaches). Interestingly, it is reported to be a sterile variety that resulted from a cross between *Agastache foeniculum* and a non-native mint. I have seen it mobbed by bumble bees in late summer.

Asters (*Symphyotrichum*) – Many asters are fantastic pollinator plants. We have quite a few native asters in our state that brighten our lives during late summer and fall. Enjoy a minute to observe them when out and about.



Bumble bees love to feed on 'Autumn Joy' sedum.

You'll usually find a wide array of very cool (and sometimes very small) bees visiting them. Their tendency to spread is one of the main considerations I have when using asters in landscapes. Many native asters are pretty vigorous rhizomatous spreaders – fantastic if you want to cover a big area of ground, reclaim a natural area, have a big bee-friendly pasture, etc., but not so great if you want to grow many different types of plants in a smaller space. Some asters also reseed. Resistance to powdery mildew is another characteristic to look for. One aster I have enjoyed growing is Purple Dome New England Aster (*Aster novae-angliae* 'Purple Dome'); however, it doesn't last forever at over 7,000 feet. I haven't decided if this is due to its cold hardiness or my lack of watering. Chicago Botanic Gardens has run some great trials over the years on a variety of ornamental plants (including goldenrods, another great but spreading pollinator plant). You can find the results of these trials by doing an internet search for "chicago botanic garden plant evaluation."

plants help pollinators



Agastache foeniculum



Dotted Blazing Star in full bloom



Many different types of bees visit 'Purple Dome' aster.

One of these trials was on a great number of asters. Just keep in mind these trials were in Chicago, not Wyoming.

Dotted Blazing Star (*Liatris punctata*) is another resource-rich pollinator plant. A native to our state (in the aster/sunflower family of plants), it can make a big splash in a landscape with its bright purple flowers. It's more than looks and nectar that it offers – it is quite drought tolerant, more so than many of the *Liatris* species you may find more commonly in nurseries (possibly due to its taproot, which can grow to depths of 7 to 16 feet - yes, feet!). It's hard to find the native species in the nurseries, though. A gardening DIY'er can start these plants from seed in the spring (it's not too difficult) and then transplant them into a sunny spot before they get too large to avoid damaging the taproot. Growing these slow-to-get-started plants from seeds requires patience, but it pays off – it often

takes a couple of years before they mature enough to really put on a flowering display. The bumble bees will find them quickly when they do! If the plants like their location, they can re-seed a fair amount (especially in spots with open, not mulched, ground).

'Autumn Joy' Sedum is another favorite late summer/early fall pollinator plant. Bees and other pollinators often cover these flowers. Its stems with their light green succulent leaves grow upward through the summer before the flowers burst into bloom. The flowers are not super bright when it comes to color – they bloom in a subtle pink color, aging to a rusty hue, but they look great with most of the other late-blooming garden plants. 'Autumn Joy' is a super-easy-to-grow, water-thrifty plant that helps wrap up the gardening season.

There are many more pollinator-friendly plants to choose from. Take a moment this fall to think about your landscape through all the seasons.

Are there spots that could use some more color in spring, summer, or fall? Want to give those pollinators a helping hand? You can read more about pollinators and see more pics of pollinator-friendly plants in our publication *Promoting Pollinators on Your Place: A Wyoming Guide*. You can find hard copies at many local University of Wyoming Extension offices or conservation districts. You can also find it online at bit.ly/wypollinators.

Check out pages 34-38 for a calendar of blooming plants and page 61 onward for lots of pictures in the "plant portraits" section that can give you some great ideas for plants to add to your landscape.

Interested in providing even larger amounts of pollinator forage on an acreage? Visit the link above to view a wide array of resources from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and others that will aid you in planning out a larger scale pollinator habitat.

Jennifer Thompson coordinates this magazine and the University of Wyoming Extension Small Acreage Issue Team.