

Heath Aster

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Heath aster is a plant that leads a double life. In the plant world there are several secret agents that remind one of a James Bond lifestyle. During the summer months heath aster looks like a common, scrawny weed, almost like a skinny tumbleweed. It uses this deception to hide from browsers and grazers if at all possible. But, come October, after undergoing a growth spurt in late summer, it changes and comes out of hiding revealing hundreds of dime size flower heads.

Heath aster, *Symphyotrichum ericoides*, is a much-branched colony-forming native perennial forb that grows 12 to 36 inches tall from rhizomes that are also multi-branched below the ground. Stems are erect, reclining or arching, grow without hairs and are woody with numerous, short branches on one side with each short branch eventually ending with a single flower. Leaves are sessile, meaning they attach directly to the stems and range in size from ½ to 1 inch long and less than ¼ inch in wide. The leaves are very small on the upper branches and usually fall away by time of flowering, thus enhancing the beauty of this plant. Flower heads are numerous, ¼ to ½ inch across, each with 15 to 18 white ray flowers surrounding the tiny yellow disk flowers. Taking their cue from the branches being located on one side of the stems, the flowers also form on one side of the short branchlets. Fruits are tiny achenes topped with a ring of long white bristles. To a botanist an achene is a small, dry, one-seeded fruit with a thin distinct wall that does not split open. Heath aster grows in all vegetational areas of Texas with the exception of the Piney Woods.

It is in October and November when a profusion of tiny white flowers gives away its location within a pasture and you can tell how common heath aster is across your pastures. Heath aster is highly palatable to livestock when young and tender, but less preferred when mature. Forage value for deer is excellent. Value for game and songbirds is poor to fair because of the long white bristles attached to the seeds. More recently we notice where this plant also shines is in its value as a late flowering plant available for pollinators seeking nectar. It will also be visited by native bees and honeybees seeking a late source of pollen before winter arrives. Late fall finds fewer flowering forbs and shrubs available for pollinators, especially for the Monarchs as they pass through Texas on their southern migration to Mexico. Pollinators need flowering plants available when they are the most actively searching for pollen and nectar being the period throughout the spring, summer and fall months.

Even with strong rhizomatous growth, this plant can frequently be overgrazed. It benefits from deferment provided by rotational grazing systems and by the yearly monitoring of the stocking rate of livestock. In overgrazed pastures heath aster will be found growing primarily in protected areas where grazing animals have limited access, such as under fences or in clumps of prickly pear or dead juniper skeletons that have been dozed and remain on the soil surface.

So, what is not to love about a native perennial forb that spreads by seeds and rhizomes, is palatable to livestock, provides excellent forage value for deer and is readily visited by pollinators. Check your pastures now for this double agent and then next year see if you can recognize it without the flowers. If you only find it growing in protected areas this is a clue that the grazing pressure is too heavy. It might serve as an indicator plant related to grazing if other desirable forbs are only found in areas

protected from grazing and browsing animals. Being out in the pastures this fall, reading the land will help you become a better land steward.

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Photo captions:

1 Throughout summer heath aster can easily be mistaken for just a common weed.



2 (Alternate photo) Throughout summer heath aster can easily be mistaken for just a common weed.



3 Heath asters growing out in the open in early fall on a well-managed ranch in the Nueces River watershed.



4 If grazing pressure from livestock or deer is heavy the plants last refuge will be in the protection of dead junipers, prickly pear clumps or under fences.



5 Several hundred flowers can be found on a single heath aster providing nectar and pollen for those in search of it.



6 Honeybees are among many pollinators that visit the flowers of heath aster during the fall in search of pollen and nectar.

