

LANDSCAPE DESIGNS NURSERY

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Amsonia for Southern Wisconsin Gardens

Amsonia is principally a native genus of North America, with one species each in eastern Asia & the eastern Mediterranean. *Amsonia* commemorates Dr. Charles Amson, an 18th century Virginia physician. There are about 22 species ranging from 1-3' in height with prostrate to erect stems. *Amsonia* belong to the Apocynaceae Family of which *Asclepias* - Milkweeds and *Vinca* also belong. Their seed pods are long and slender and open similarly to Milkweeds. Rarely, some people may react to the plant's latex sap.

Foliage & Form:

The very narrow - ½" to 2" wide to 3" long lanceolate to elliptic leaves are alternate and range from rich green to bluish-green. Most turn an impressive glowing yellow to golden color in the autumn. They are all upright herbaceous bushy long lived perennials. Some species and cultivars have a growth spurt of foliage atop the flowers once the flowering is finished. Post flowering, most taxa may be cut back to just below the flowering panicles - or by about 1/3. I have not noticed any reblooming from this type of pruning.

Soil:

Tolerant of most any moist well drained soil, with some species enjoying swampy conditions. This makes them ideal for rain gardens. Typical garden soils with a pH in the 6.5 to 7.5 pH suit them just fine. *Amsonia* are also somewhat tolerant of de-icing salts, however, I would avoid heavily salted locations.

Lighting:

Full sun to light dappled shade.

Mulching:

Mulch in the autumn or very early spring with ½ to 1½" of mulch. However, mulch is seldom required.

Flowers:

Terminal panicles of ½" to 1" starry 5 petaled funnelform flowers in rich periwinkle blue (often fading with age) to nearly white and are held erect on sturdy stems.

Winter:

They may be cut down to about 2" from the earth's surface in late Autumn or very early Spring.

Fertilization:

Butterflies, carpenter bees, hummingbird moths, hummingbirds and many other pollinators visit *Amsonia*. *Amsonia tabernaemontana* foliage is a food source for the Coral Hairstreak Butterfly larvae.

Planting:

Planting may be at any time the earth is workable.

Propagation:

While seed is wonderful for growing the species, the cultivars may not come true from seed. Seed must be sown in the Autumn. The roots are very woody on most species and may require a reciprocating saw to divide them. This may be accomplished in the autumn or as soon as the earth thaws in the spring. Cuttings are also a mean of propagation.

Pest and diseases:

All *Amsonia* are nearly pest & disease free. Very resistant to deer and rabbit browsing.

Hardiness:

All of the following are hardy in our S. Wisconsin Zones 5-8 gardens. All of the following have proven hardy in Madison, WI.

Amsonia ciliata -- Downy Amsonia is native to the Southern US and grows from 1-3' with dark green leaves fringed with silky hairs on nice erect stems. Its light blue flowers are born later in spring in full sun or light dappled shade. It prefers good moisture during the growing season. If grown in too much shade, the stems may topple. Excellent autumn yellow foliage color. The epithet, *ciliata* mean marginally covered with fine soft hairs - referring to the foliage.

Cultivars include:

var. *filifolia* is a prostrate growing ground cover form with very fine leaves and light blue spring flowers.

'Georgia Pancake' is another name for *filifolia*.

'Spring Sky' grows with sturdy stems about 2' high with narrow green leaves and sky-blue flowers.

var. *tenuifolia* 'Verdant Venture' has large ephemeral flowers of light blue to violet that blanket the plant in May. Its thread-like lush, dark green foliage turns golden yellow late in the autumn. The fine-textured and wonderfully compact plants are 28 inches tall and 60 inches wide

Amsonia hubrichtii - Threadleaf Amsonia is native to Oklahoma and Arkansas and grows 2-3' tall with thread-like 3" long green leaves that turn brilliant spectacular golden-yellow in the Autumn. The light blue flowers may age to near white, providing a nice changing garden pallet. The epithet commemorates Mr. Leslie Hubricht, who discovered it in 1942, when he was an assistant at the Missouri Botanical Gardens.

Cultivars include:

'Butterscotch' has the same foliage as the species, but with reddish stems and intense butterscotch colored autumn foliage. Improved resistance to tip die-back. Steel-blue flowers atop 3' tall stems.

'Green Mist' has even finer deep green foliage with light blue flowers. Grows about 3' tall.

'String Theory' matures at 18-24" tall with light periwinkle-blue late spring to early summer flowers, atop sturdy stems with narrow dark green foliage. Brilliant copper-orange autumn colored foliage with carmine-red stems, is a show stopper in the garden. 'String Theory' may be a hybrid of *A. hubrichtii*.

'Seaford Skies' is a hybrid with *A. tabernaemontana* with ferny foliage on 36" sturdy vigorous stems.

Amsonia illustris - Ozark Blue star is native to South Central USA and is very similar to *A. tabernaemontana* but has thicker leathery foliage and pendant fruits. The epithet *illustris* means bright or lustrous, referring to the foliage.

Cultivars include:

'Seventh Inning Stretch' is a hybrid of *A. illustris*. Initially glossy foliage emerges green but is smaller than a typical *A. illustris*. The habit on this hybrid is upright but more reserved and is bushier. Light blue flower clusters bloom at the top of the thin stems in late May, early June eventually reaching 3'. Full sun to light shade.

Amsonia tabernaemontana - Common Blue Star is native to much of the mid and eastern USA and grows 1-3' tall with wider linear leaves that turns a rich golden yellow in the Autumn. The ½ to ¾" wide dark to pale blue flowers are held in loose terminal heads blooming in spring to early summer. This blue star enjoys full sun in moist soils. Hardy in zones 3-8. Larval food for the Coral Hairstreak Butterfly.

The epithet *tabernaemontana* commemorates one of the fathers of German Botany. He was a physician, herbalist & botanist. Jakob Theodor Muller, went by the name Tabernaemontanus - the mountain near which he was born in 1525.

Cultivars include:

'Blue Ice' grows about 12-15" tall. Rich navy-blue buds open to rich periwinkle blue starry flowers over a longer period of time. Wider leaves than the species. Maybe a hybrid.

'Fontuna' This red stem selection has slightly darker blue flower clusters at the end of May into June on 36" + plants. In August, the red seed heads are also showy. Zone 4-9. Full sun to light shade. Well drained to dry soil.

'Halfway to Arkansas' has foliage that is a glossy deep green and uniformly needle-like. Pale blue flowers cluster in May. Rounded mounds top out just over 48" tall and wide. Yellow autumn color arrives a bit later than other *Amsonia*. Full sun to light shade in well drained to moist soil.

'Short Stop' is a compact 2'+ plant that blooms the end of May through early June with light blue, conical shaped, flower clusters. While most *Amsonia* have a growth spurt after flowering this one is stopped short. Great yellow autumn color. Full sun is best. Average to well drained soils.

'Starstruck' has sparkling star-shaped, sky-blue flowers with a full form of new olive-green foliage aging to vibrant green with lighter midribs and 20" tall dark olive stems. Long blooming. Full sun, average soil. Good yellow autumn foliar color. A hybrid with *A. rigida*.

'Storm Cloud' - is an exceptional form emerges with dark, near black, stems and foliage. This also gives the starshaped blue flowers a deeper hue compared to the species. New growth often forms on top of the spent flowering stems, additionally growing to total height of 30+". Full sun, average soil. Autumn color progresses from burgundy purple to golden yellow - very attractive.

var. *montana* (from mountainous regions)

'Short Stack' is a bushy, compact, excellent form, growing to about 10-12" tall. Yellow autumn color.

var. *salicifolia* (Willow-like foliage)

'Midway to Montana' has foliage around 3/8 - 1/2" wide, on clumps maturing to 3' tall and wide. Light blue flower clusters bloom at around 12-18". It has a foliar growth atop the flower heads once they have finished blooming. These adaptable plants will grow in full sun to light shade and most any soil except wet. Autumn color is a striking golden yellow.

Other hybrid cultivars include:

'Bases Loaded' emerges with dark green shoots and foliage. These hybrid plants are heavy blooming with large light blue flower clusters that begin to open at the end of May on 18-24" stems. These plants have a reserved growth spurt to 30 inches after the flowers fade. Average soil. Nice yellow autumn foliage.

'First Hit' has foliage that is exceptionally dark and glossy on red-purple stems in Spring, that are quickly followed by clusters of light blue flowers. The habit is also more compact growing around 2'+ high. Nice yellow Autumn color too. Full sun, average soil.

Conclusion

Amsonia are wonderful garden plants that could have a location in nearly every garden. They are tough, long-lived plants with good wildlife benefits. *Amsonia* has just begun to be noticed by the perennial industry with new cultivars being introduced on a regular basis. I don't know of any double flowering or variegated forms. With 'Storm Cloud's near black stems, I think the future holds some good potential for persistent very dark foliage and more intensely colored flowers.

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