Look for autumn colors to start early with these late-

Flowers for a Ch

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Photos by Adele Hodde and Ellen Starr

Those dog days of summer are finished now, and the north breeze carries a hint of winter. It's still warm, but not quite. Summer is essentially finished. But there is a parting gift from nature, for those willing to look.

Roadsides, pastures, fallow fields and forests are now speckled with brilliant yellow, deep purple and pastel blue—more color than existed since May. They're Illinois wildflowers. The last of the season, the classic late-bloomers.

Signature flowers of summer's end in Illinois include some of the more extroverted members of the Aster family—sunflowers (*Helianthus* sp.), Spanish needles (*Bidens* sp.) and goldenrod (*Solidago* sp.)—ironweeds (*Vernonea* sp.) and mistflower (*Eupatorium coelistinum*).

Worldwide, the Asteracea or Compositae family includes some 1,100 genera and around 20,000 species. It and the orchids (Orchidaceae) are the two largest plant families in the world. Asters are considered the most complex of green growing things, and are characterized by multiple small flowers (called florets) arranged tightly into one round head (disk) that appears to be one flower. Disk florets are usually brown and not all that noteworthy, with the surrounding, petal-like ray flowers accounting for all the fireworks. So spectacular are the colors that domesticated varieties—common sunflower, cosmos, zinnias, dahlias and even gourmet lettuces and artichokes—are prize-winners in many flower gardens.

One of the fall flowers in the yellow spectrum is *Bidens*, better known from the descriptive common names of beggar's ticks, stickseeds or devil's pitchforks.

But the autumn focus is not on any kind of cultivated aster. A walk on the wild side will help discover some of nature's finest wild floral offerings.

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Typically, folks question the 6- to 12-foot-tall, yellow-flowered "weeds" seen growing in roadside patches. Like its larger-flowered, larger-seeded and oft-cultivated cousin, wild sunflowers (*Helianthus* sp.) have brilliant-yellow, elongated petal flowers surrounding a central head of small, brownish, radially arranged disk flowers. Native Americans once gathered the tiny seeds of this perennial to grind for flour and to make oil for cooking and hair dressing, and early settlers believed that planting sunflowers near their homes would protect them from malaria. One can imagine that defense didn't work out well, but perhaps the pretty flowers made them feel better when they were sick.

Another contributor to the countryside splashes of yellow are from beggar's ticks, also known as stickseeds, devil's pitchforks, harvest lice, cow lice and Spanish needles. These are from the genus *Bidens*, which includes 15 species and four varieties, most of which occur in the Midwest. Seeds from this plant are of two varieties: two- or four-pronged. The two-pronged, bootjack type is typically associated with those species with the showiest flowers. Regardless of prong number, these seeds will cling to fur, feathers and clothing like wood ticks on a coon dog. The same soul who so admired golden blankets of these plants in late summer and early fall may well mumble unmentionable things under his breath as he spends an hour pulling them out of his pant-legs.

Last, but certainly not least, in the yellow spectrum are the goldenrods (*Solidago* sp.), which include 125 species throughout the United States. Goldenrod is perhaps the most commonly encountered old-field wildflower, forming large, dense stands that call to mind a veritable golden sea. Goldenrod is especially striking on a slightly overcast day with a calm breeze.

Goldenrod's prominence and yellower-than-yellow flower clusters draw much attention, and the plant has been falsely accused of irritating allergy sufferers. Not so. The plant is self-pollinating. Pollen granules are coated with a sticky gelatinous substance that causes them to adhere easily to insects, which crawl about the many-flowered cluster, pollinating as they go. The name *Solidago* comes from the Latin "solidare," meaning to join, or to make whole. It is apparent from this name that one or more of the goldenrods was believed to possess medicinal qualities helpful in healing wounds.

Fall-blooming members of the aster family include a number of tall, yellow-flowered plants, such as Jerusalem artichoke.

Prominent in old fields, goldenrod is self-pollinating, and the pollen is not blowing about on fall breezes causing misery for allergy sufferers.

Striking combinations of goldenrod and deep, purple-colored ironweeds are common in fall landscapes.

Lest we give yellow all the credit for late-summer/early fall color, consider the ironweeds (*Vernonia* sp.). Ironweed florets are a deep, dark, elegant purple, often found evenly and profusely interwoven throughout large patches of goldenrod. These dark constellations of ironweed contrast prominently within a canary-yellow cosmos composed of infinite goldenrod flowers. The common name refers to the toughness of the stem, not to the color of the flower. At least seven recognized species of ironweeds occur in the Midwest. Yet another plant with purported medicinal qualities, ironweed was thought to help cure stomach ailments.

Mistflower (*Eupatorium coelistinum*), is one of the Joe-Pye-weeds, named so for the Native American healer who used them to treat a number of ailments, including the miraculous cure of a typhus epidemic. Another common name for this group of plants is boneset, which suggests natural healers used this plant to aid in the setting of broken bones.

Mistflower aptly describes this little plant, as it forms thick, amorphous patches in low-lying areas. The beautiful, pale-green plants are covered with a profusion of fluffy, pastel-blue flowers—downy little buttons of sapphire that often show a hint of pink, as if absorbing the last beams from an autumn sunset. In the half-light of the early morning hours, these patches seem to glow, visible as a radiant azure cloud even when smothered in dense fog.

Summer's last wildflowers truly are the appropriate flowers for a change. While they bloom long, their demise is quick and a sure harbinger of impending shorter days and cooler temperatures.

Those dreading the long, cold winter shouldn't despair because the show's not over just yet. Even as the summer flowers fade, leafy tree canopies ignite and burst into a riotous conflagration of multi-colored glory, transforming dark green and somber shadows into flickering light.

It is the beginning of another wondrous autumn. Summer has done its work. The harvest is in the barns and bins, and the time for rest is at hand. It truly is time for a change.

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From a distance, the pastel-blue mistflower appears as mist rising from the water in streams, ditches and other low areas.