

THOUGH ONLY *Amsonia tabernaemontana* is commonly cultivated, the genus *Amsonia* contains 22 species, most of which have horticultural merit or potential. The majority occur in a wide range of habitats throughout central, southern and eastern North America. A few others are native to southern Europe, Turkey, Japan, Korea and China. The genus is named for Dr John Amson, an English physician who settled in Virginia in the mid 1700s, where he became friends with John Clayton, a British botanist celebrated for his work with New World flora.

Renewed interest in North American native species in recent years has resulted in perhaps a dozen *Amsonia* species now being available from specialist US nurseries and about half that in the UK. A number of distinct botanical varieties and cultivars are also offered. In the US they are commonly known as bluestars.

Genus characteristics

Amsonia is a genus of clump-forming herbaceous perennials with multiple leafy stems growing from a semi-woody rootstock. Plant height varies from 12.5cm to nearly 1.2m. The alternate leaves are entire and range in shape from broadly ovate, up to 2.5cm wide, to linear and needle-like to only 2mm wide. In spring and early summer the flowers are borne in terminal paniced or corymbose cymes. The individual flowers, up to 1.5cm in diameter, have funnel-shaped corollas with five sharply pointed, spreading petal lobes, and are star-like in overall appearance. Ranging from very pale to rich sky blue, flower colour is most concentrated in bud stage and sometimes fades to near-white when fully opened in strong sunlight. Seeds are produced in cylindrical capsules



Rick Darke

Amsonia in cultivation

RICK DARKE assesses a genus of herbaceous perennials that contains a range of species grown for their blue flowers and autumn colour

(follicles) up to 10cm in length.

Like most other members of the *Apocynaceae* (dogbane family), *Amsonia* species have milky sap. Although the sap of some relatives such as *Nerium* contains highly toxic alkaloids, the sap of *Amsonia* is relatively innocuous. It is not known to be harmful to humans but does seem to discourage predation by deer and other mammals – a good thing for many gardeners.

Garden use

A sweep of star-like sky-blue flowers in spring is certainly an appealing sight but, pretty as their flowers are,

bluestars have many other characteristics that make them among the best garden perennials. Most would be worth growing for foliage alone. All bluestars produce masses of rich green leaves that remain neat and attractive throughout the growing season, generally free from any insect pests. The broad leaves of larger species such as *A. tabernaemontana* result in a bold-textured presence that adds drama to any design, while more thread-leaved species such as *A. hubrichtii* are so soft-textured as to appear cloud-like – even finer than many grasses. The height and density



Rich Burke

Amsonia hubrichtii (left and above), here growing in the author's garden, was unknown to most gardeners ten years ago. It is now widely grown in the US and is becoming increasingly available in the UK. As with many species of *Amsonia* it has particularly vibrant autumn colour that can last for a month or more

of the larger species allows them to function almost like shrubs during the growing season, while others such as *A. ciliata* var. *tenuifolia* are low enough to be used as groundcover.

In addition to their spring and summer appeal, many bluestars develop vibrant yellow and gold autumn foliage colour when grown in warm sunny situations. The colour of some, including *A. hubrichtii*, rivals the best trees and shrubs.

Amsonia tabernaemontana

The most commonly encountered bluestar, this species occurs naturally in moist, partly sunny habitats in eastern North America. Mature plants form an upright mound to 90cm tall with equal spread. There is considerable variation in leaf width and foliage texture, so much so that botanists and horticulturists have often disagreed about whether the variation is enough to warrant dividing this species into separate species or varieties. The lanceolate to broadly elliptic leaves are typically

7.5–10cm long, up to 2.5cm wide and often finely hairy beneath. The foliage reliably turns a pleasing light yellow in autumn, but is never as brilliant as *A. hubrichtii*. The pale blue flowers are 1–2cm across and appear from mid-spring to early summer, depending upon situation and the variability of individual seedlings. Some plants possess a light sweet fragrance, though none have yet been commercially selected for this quality.

It performs well in a wide range of soils, from droughty sands to heavy clays, but does best in moderately organic, moisture-retentive soil. It will withstand full sun, but is also at home in light or partial shade, and can be an effective addition to the deciduous woodland garden. It is cold-hardy to USDA zone 3.

Amsonia montana is a name of no botanical standing that appears in many horticultural reference books and in innumerable nursery catalogues. It is associated with a low-growing (to 60cm tall), small-leaved form of *A. tabernaemontana*.

This variant is distinct and valuable from a horticultural viewpoint and the current trend in nurseries has been to refer to it as *A. tabernaemontana* 'Montana'.

A related selection, only 25cm tall, has recently been marketed by Plant Delights Nursery, North Carolina, as 'Short Stack', again, best listed as a cultivar of *A. tabernaemontana*.

Amsonia tabernaemontana* var. *salicifolia

This variety differs from the typical species in its narrower, consistently lanceolate, glabrous leaves giving it a willow-like appearance.

Amsonia illustris

This native of southeastern North America occurs naturally in Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma and Texas. Named for its exceptionally shiny leathery leaves, it is otherwise very similar in appearance to *A. tabernaemontana*, and in fact many very lustrous-leaved plants offered commercially as *A. tabernaemontana* are actually *A. illustris*. It also differs in its hairy as opposed to hairless calyx.

Amsonia ludoviciana

Once believed to occur naturally only in southern Louisiana, this species has since been reported in Georgia, Mississippi and South Carolina. It is distinguished by the white woolly undersides to the elliptic leaf blades.

Amsonia hubrichtii

Though the preceding are fine garden plants, this species is truly distinct and extraordinary, and represents the most dramatic and important recent addition to the garden palette of bluestars. Ten years ago it was an obscure collector's plant and today it is increasingly available through retail nurseries in the US and UK. ➤

Native only to the Ouachita mountains of Arkansas and Oklahoma, this exceptional plant was only discovered in 1942 by Leslie Hubricht, a specialist in fresh water molluscs, and named in his honour. Mature plants have more than 50 stems, forming a broad-spreading (to 1.2m wide) billowy mass of the finest texture. The leaves are truly thread-like, up to 7.5cm long and less than 2mm wide, and are extraordinarily numerous and closely spaced along the 60–90cm tall stems. In spring the stems are topped by a multitude of sky-blue flowers lasting about 2–3 weeks. Summer foliage is a rich medium green. When grown in strong sunlight, the peak season for this species is autumn, when the stems and leaves turn a vibrant gold that endures for a month or more. By the beginning of winter the colour has turned to a dark honey-brown, and the leaves gradually begin dropping as winter proceeds.

This species has proved cold hardy to USDA zone 4, yet is unfazed by the summer extremes of heat and drought. It thrives in a wide range of soils from sands to clays, and seems capable of thriving in both acid and alkaline conditions in the US. In the UK one report suggests it may prefer acid soil.

Amsonia ciliata

Occuring naturally on sandy soils in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Texas, this fine-textured species is superficially similar to *A. hubrichtii*. Typical height is 60–90cm. The linear-lanceolate leaves are 2.5–5cm long and up to 4mm wide, but rarely as threadlike as *A. hubrichtii*. It can usually be recognised by the fine fringe of hairs lining the stems and new leaves. This is more pronounced on some plants than others and, when

well developed, adds significantly to the plants' appeal by glowing when back-lit or side-lit by the sun. The light-blue flowers, 1.2cm across, are held in clusters that tend to be held higher above the foliage than in the other cultivated species, and are among the showiest of all bluestars. It requires a sharply drained, relatively infertile soil for best performance and should be placed in full sun or very light shade. Cold hardy into USDA zone 4, this species has exceptional heat and drought tolerance.

Plants of this species collected in the wild by botanist Mary Henry have proved durable in cultivation for half a century at her Gladwyne, Pennsylvania property, now the Henry Foundation for Botanical Research. An especially large-flowered, ciliate form is being vegetatively propagated and introduced to cultivation as *A. ciliata* 'Spring Sky'.

***Amsonia ciliata* var. *tenuifolia* (syn. *A. ciliata* var. *filifolia*)**

Only 30cm or less in height, this lower-growing, finer-textured variety of *A. ciliata* is native to sandhills, pine barrens and rocky shores, from Georgia to Texas and Mexico, north to North Carolina and southern Missouri. A nearly prostrate variant of this variety was discovered by botanist Bob McCartney in the sandhills of Georgia's Wheeler County, and has been recently marketed by Plant Delights Nursery as the cultivar 'Georgia Pancake'. Barely 12.5cm high, a single mature plant will carpet a 60cm diameter circle with bright green needle-like foliage. Tiny pale blue flowers appear at the branch tips in spring, however their colour is surpassed in strength by the autumn foliage, which turns rich shades of gold and amber if plants are grown in full sun.



Michael Comth Fife-Fix



Rick Durie

Amsonia orientalis (top), native to the Old World, is one of the more familiar species to European gardeners. *Amsonia ciliata* var. *tenuifolia* (above) has exceptionally narrow leaves and is shorter in height than most other North American species

Amsonia peeblesii

Native only to Arizona, this relatively obscure species has recently been introduced to cultivation. It grows to a height of 40–90cm, has narrow, linear leaves, pale blue flowers and yellow autumn colour. This species appears to be highly drought-tolerant and therefore holds promise for gardens in truly arid regions.

Amsonia jonesii

Native to Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Utah, this is another North American species that deserves further attention from gardeners in arid regions. It grows to a height of about 30cm



Rick Darke



RHS Herbarium

Amsonia ciliata 'Spring Sky' (top) is a recent introduction distinguished by its larger flowers and prominent leaf hairs. *Amsonia tabernaemontana* (above) is exceptionally hardy and the yellow autumn foliage develops best when grown in full sun

***Amsonia orientalis* (syn. *Rhazya orientalis*)**

One of the few bluestars not from North America, this species is native to NE Greece and NW Turkey. It is therefore more familiar to European gardeners than it is to those in the US. With short stature (to 45cm tall), narrowly ovate leaves to 5cm long and relatively deep lavender-blue flowers about 1cm across, it superficially resembles the diminutive forms of *A. tabernaemontana*. It also has yellow autumn colour. The genus *Rhazya* is now included in *Amsonia* by most authorities but it was previously separated on the basis of minor details of leaf hairs.

***Amsonia* 'Blue Ice'**

Amsonia 'Blue Ice' is a superb garden plant of doubtful origin and species. Reported to have been discovered as a seedling in a New England nursery block of *A. tabernaemontana*, it grows only 40cm tall and has perhaps the deepest lavender-blue flowers of all the currently known bluestars. It bears a superficial resemblance to *A. orientalis*.

Amsonia elliptica

Another bluestar not from the US, this species is native to Japan, China, and Korea. It grows to a height of 40cm and bears narrowly elliptic leaves and flowers to about 1cm across. Some forms have particularly rich blue flowers but it is rare in cultivation and deserves further attention.

Cultivation

Durable and unusually long-lived, the species described here are extremely rewarding perennials that are of easy cultivation. They prefer full sun or very light shade but are broadly tolerant of soil types and ranges of acidity. All will thrive in garden soils of average moisture, but many, especially the species native to the North American south, are extremely tolerant of droughty conditions. As a group they are among the most cold-hardy of perennials, with most capable of surviving winters in USDA zones 4. Heat tolerance is never a problem. In fact, a lack of strong summer sun is one of the few things that can result in weak growth and diminished autumn foliage colour. This is something that UK growers need to be aware of.

Propagation

Amsonia species can be grown from seed sown over winter or in early spring. Seeds require cold treatment for germination. They can also be

propagated by stem cuttings taken in early summer, and this method is most appropriate for retaining the unique characteristics of selected forms and cultivated varieties. Division is the least practical method of propagating bluestars, since the woody rootstocks of mature plants are nearly impossible to cleave without a sharp spade or hatchet. Bluestars are sometimes inclined to self-sow, but this is rarely a nuisance. The one point to consider is that since many bluestars readily cross-pollinate, gardeners with several species growing in proximity to one another may find hybrids appearing in their plantings. Some of these may be distinct and worth saving but others may be inferior and discarded.

Bluestars can be somewhat slow to reach mature size, but this is offset by their long life in cultivation. Unlike so many herbaceous perennials that experience centre die-out after just a few years, bluestars produce strong, uniform growth almost indefinitely, requiring no more than cutting back to ground level for annual maintenance. Since bluestars remain attractive into late autumn or into winter, cutting back may be postponed until late winter or early spring.

Several of the species described here are relatively new to cultivation and need further trialling. Others are better established and have proved to be superb garden plants. Because their woody rootstocks prove to be tough, bluestars can be planted in bold sweeps and masses that will define garden spaces and designs for decades. ■

RICK DARKE, previously Curator at Longwood Gardens, Pennsylvania, has authored multiple books. See www.rickdarke.com for further background information