

I need to start this column today with a profuse apology to Jay Siegel. In my column about Jay and his wonderful fuchsia display I gave him the new name of “Joe.” I’m so sorry Jay; thanks for being so gracious and understanding.

Have you ever wondered what a “Michaelmas daisy” was? It’s a common name for the purple asters abloom in many of our gardens as early as August and sometimes as late as November. Asters come in many shades of blue and purple, including magenta. Some asters are pink; some are white. They range in height from one to four feet. These great fall-blooming plants come in all shapes and sizes. You can still find them at local nurseries, grocery stores and home improvement centers this month. Asters make great cut flowers, lasting for at least a week at a time. Each stem is covered with multiple blossoms. These abundant blossoms provide pollen for bees, butterflies and other insects preparing for winter.

Asters are related to sunflowers and come in annual, biennial and perennial forms. The English named them “starworts” because the blossoms are shaped like stars. Later their name was changed to “Michaelmas Daisy” because they bloom near St. Michaelmas Day in September. Legend has it that Jupiter was angered by the fighting and destruction during the Iron Age when people learned to make tools and weapons. Jupiter sent a flood to destroy the earth. The gods fled the earth and the last to leave was the goddess Astraea. In her sadness she asked to be turned into a star and her tears dropped to earth and turned to lovely starflowers or asters.

I have perennial asters growing in my garden in three different types of soil and moisture conditions. One group is in nearly full shade, one in well-draining full sun and one in a moist, sunny area with clay soil. So if you’ve been timid about planting other perennials in your garden try asters, you can’t fail. Pop them in the ground and they’ll perform profusely. One caveat though, if you plant them they’ll definitely multiply

Multiplying asters aren’t necessarily a bad thing. Plant them in bare areas of your garden. They’re great for weed control. Asters grow so densely that weeds can’t wend their sneaky way into the group. You can plant asters in pots to control their spread. Some varieties have dark almost purple stems with evergreen-looking leaves. The petals of the flowers are longer. This variety grows more airily and doesn’t seem to form such large spreading clumps.

Clumping, spreading asters can be controlled by cutting them down to the ground when they begin growing in early spring. For some reason this causes them to be a bit better behaved. In November I’m planning to cut my asters down to the ground and again in mid spring to see what happens. I’ll report back to you. In spite of their unruly behavior asters are truly a plant worthy of any garden. Their color and abundance is welcome when all our other plants are winding down in their splendor. Plant asters in your gardens and you’ll have them to share (both bouquets and plants) with all your friends for years to come.

Chrysanthemums are another great plant to find this time of year to brighten both containers and gardens. Most of us purchase these colorful plants to put into pots for late fall and winter color. This year after their blossoms begin to fade, try cutting each stem back to four to six inches and plant the chrysanthemums directly into your garden soil. Select a sunny, well-drained spot. If our winter isn’t too severe you’ll be rewarded in January through March with blossoms. You can also use this method with chrysanthemums in containers. Many chrysanthemums last for several years in our Northwest gardens. To find out more about chrysanthemums visit the National Chrysanthemum Society site at www.mums.org.

Before I end today’s column I want to remind everyone that October is National Breast Cancer Awareness Month. An estimated 182,800 women in the United States will be diagnosed with breast cancer this year. As a five-year breast cancer survivor I can’t stress enough the importance of performing routine breast exams each and every month. It is also extremely important to have a mammogram every year after the age of forty. If you can’t afford the cost of a mammogram contact Pat Degracia at Kitsap County Health District 360-337-5235. The American Cancer Society has a free help line at 1-800-ACS-2345. Don’t be afraid. Early detection of breast cancer has saved hundreds of thousands of lives, including mine.

You can email comments to Peg at gardenmentor@yahoo.com or in care of this newspaper.