

One of the most satisfactory wildflowers that I grow is *Amsonia tabernaemontana*. It is easily grown from seed and easily grown in the garden. It has a wide distribution pattern in the state of Louisiana. It seems to be indifferent as to whether the soil is acid or neutral and I suspect that it does well in a slightly basic soil as well. I have seen it growing in well-drained sandy soils and in poorly drained clay soil. An excellent plant for beginners, it is mostly at home in light shade or sunny margins of woodlands. The growth pattern of the mature plant, which is a long lived perennial, gives the impression of "coming up blooming." In early to mid spring, immature leaves and buds elongate quickly into several stems (three to five) that grow up to twelve or more inches tall. All the while, leaves are enlarging and the buds turn into a cluster of true steel blue small star shaped flowers. In fact, one of the common names is Bluestars. It is a welcome and distinct flower in its time of blooming. Individual flowers are small; about one-half inch across in a corolla of five narrow petals and the terminal cluster has perhaps 20 to 25 blue flowers. In the wild, the growing sites are usually poorly drained soil that becomes quite dry in early summer. Leaves are smooth (glabrous), and they vary a bit from alternate lanceolate to broadly elliptic, up to about two to three inches long and an inch or slightly more wide. It has a milky sap, is in the Dogbane Family, and is probably poisonous to the human system. The open flowers are eagerly sipped by passing butterflies. Otherwise, the plant has no serious diseases or insect pests. I recall no deer damages to the ones that I grow on the place. The plants are not demanding in their water or fertilizer and the leaves are green until late summer when they begin to show signs of going dormant.

During the while, seedpods develop in long slender pods or follicles in pairs. Usually there are only two or three pairs of follicles from each flower cluster. The follicles are characteristic of the Dogbane Family. Each follicle is about three or four inches long and contains about ten seeds each. The pods look like a tight roll of dried leaves rolled into a bundle the length of the firm pod covering that has been cut by scissors into sections of one-half inch by one-eighths inch in diameter, all dark in color and ready to plant. One of the easiest ways to plant the seeds is in a pot of good soil, slightly covered and set aside to the elements of the weather and next spring tiny green seedling appear. From time to time fertilize the developing seedlings with liquid fertilizer, or just keep them moist with plain water and grow them off for the warm growing season. Then they can be potted into larger pots or planted into the beds or borders or they can be left alone to grow winter roots. Usually just setting on the ground is adequate, as they don't seem to suffer from winter freezing.

There are several other species of *Amsonia* in Louisiana. The next most common species is *Amsonia ludoviciana*. It has downy hairs on the undersides of the leaves and beneath the opened petals. It will grow in more sun and is as easily grown as the more common *Amsonia tabernaemontana*. There are many other forms and species of *Amsonia*, all variations on the same theme as a musician would say. Mostly the leaves are the major differences. Some are very narrow (ciliate), but all have blue flowers very much alike and seedpods or follicles almost identical in every feature. Perhaps the major fault is the short blooming season and then the rest of the growing season there no flowers, only leaves and developing seeds.

As much as I enjoy growing plants and seeing native plants used in the gardens of other people, generally I work mainly with common plants. There is nothing that pleases me more than to see large expanses of showy native plants in bloom or uncommon plants growing in sunny edges of woods or in their special habitats. It certainly excites me more than to see rare plants growing and holding their own in their special locations of special needs. Rare plants are for all to enjoy but please leave them alone.

There are so many common plants to enjoy and the Amsonia species are easy to enjoy at home and in the field. Carl Amason is a superior plantsman who lives and gardens near Calion, Arkansas.