

Are the New Astilbe Really Better?®

Leo Blanchette

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Astilbe are an asset to the garden for most of the growing season. Their elegant flowering panicles wave above colorful, leafy mounds of foliage. Interest starts in early spring when the plants first begin to appear. Many varieties have red-, bronze-, or copper-colored leaves which add ornamental interest to the border even when the plants are not in bloom. The flowers make excellent, cut additions to fresh arrangements or dried; they can enhance a winter bouquet.

In the landscape, astilbes are best massed as drifts in the sun or the shade. They vary in size with the bodacious boldness of the giants like *A. grandis* or *A. ×arendsii* 'Moerheim's Glory', the exquisitely graceful arching plumes of 'Straussenfeder', the pat-em-on-the-head tufts like 'Siska' or the diminutive demeanor of *A. 'Yakushima'* (syn. *A. yakushimansis*). They all enjoy a moist soil, and resent hot dry areas. In their native habitat, they grow along stream banks in full sun or partial shade. If the pH rises above 7, iron chlorosis may occur. Fertilizing with an acidic fertilizer like ammonium sulfate will lower the pH and insure green leaf growth. Although you can grow astilbes in hot areas, supplemental irrigation during the summer is a must. Astilbes are also heavy feeders enjoying a humus rich soil with a high nitrogen level.

Georg Arends of Ronsdorf, Germany, was one of the first hybridizers of astilbe and many of his cultivars are still available and popular in today's market. Arends bred with species that came from China, Korea, and Japan. He passed over the American representative, *A. biternata*. Some of his named cultivars also have been lost to cultivation, or were transported to nurseries and botanical gardens in eastern Europe during the 1920s, where they became effectively "lost". Over the years some misnamed astilbes have appeared in the trade. There are a number of plants represented by more than one form. Among these are two 'Dunkellachs' both similar in flower, but one taller than the other. Two 'Erica' are also in the market, one with reddish foliage and one with green foliage. Even Arends introduced a second 'Deutschland' which is slightly shorter and a few days later than his first. Other incorrect names have originated from inattention to detail. Bare-root astilbes are difficult to identify, so great care must be taken to keep plants straight.

Astilbes have few pests, but black vine weevils do present a threat. Adult damage is easily recognized by the paper-punch notches on the leaf edge. It takes a major infestation to reduce the vigor of the plants. The most severe damage is done by their ½-inch-long grubs that feed on the roots and crown during the dormant season. *Heterorhabditis bacteriophora*, a beneficial nematode, hunt out beetle grubs in containers. Although, they don't eliminate 100% of the weevils, they do seem to keep their numbers within tolerable limits. Chemical sprays can be used to kill adults and remove egg-laying potential. They must be applied when the adults are active. Adult emergence is specific to each area so check with local extension agents for guidance.

Since the adult weevils feed at night, it is also more effective to spray in late afternoon. Foliar and root knot nematodes also can stress plants. Some stunting can occur in severely infested plants, but death seldom happens.

In the garden, most have a clumping nature and need division every 4 or 5 years. This can be easily be done in early spring when the new shoots are just beginning to appear. In order to maintain cultivar identity, growers should propagate plants asexually by division. We divide most plants down to a single eye and grow them on in 3-inch pots (with very short cultivars like 'Willie Buchanan' we start with two or three eyes). At seasons end we have five- or six-eyed plants that are ready for 1- or 2-gal containers.

Everyone has their favorites. Beauty is always in the eye of the beholder. One's likes may be another's dislikes. Like so many plants in today's market, new varieties are turning up at an astounding rate. We each decided to narrow down our favorites that were very hardy cultivars. The following is the list of our top 14 with a short description.

Cultivar names and groupings were based on those presented in the *List of Names of Perennials* by H.J. van de Laar, G. Fortgens, M.H.A. Hoffman, and P.C. De Jong, Proefstation voor Boomkwekerij, Booskoop, Netherlands, 1995.

ARENDSII GROUP

'Bressingham Beauty' — This Alan Bloom hybrid has rich pink flowers. The panicle is upright, but the branches arch, giving a very delicate appearance. It is 36 inches tall and blooms midseason. The foliage is medium green.

'Cattleya' — This 1953 Arends hybrid is still one of the best taller pinks. At 42 inches, it makes a strong statement in the garden during the midseason. The panicle is straight, full, and well branched.

'Erika' (Erica) — This tall, light pink astilbe was released in 1940 by Arends. It gets 36-inches tall and blooms early midseason. Before blooming the foliage has strong bronze tones. We also have an 'Erica' with green foliage.

'Tamarix' — A clump-forming Ruys hybrid, this light rose-purple astilbe looks like a tall offspring of *A.*

'Weisse Gloria' (White Gloria) — one of the last whites to bloom. The short, narrow, panicle is tight and full. It gets 20 inches tall and it flowers late midseason.

CRISPA GROUP

'Lilliput' — Very short thick plumes are salmon-rose. The foliage is dark green with a crisp appearance. It is well suited to the rock garden at 6 inches tall. It flowers late midseason. Arends introduced 'Lilliput' in 1927.

JAPONICA GROUP

'Bonn' — This sport of 'Bremen' was introduced in 1930 by George Arends. It has a bright rose, full flower that gets to 24 inches. The leaves are dark green and it blooms early midseason.

'Ellie' — This hybrid from Holland was released in the mid 1990s. It is white, full, and well branched. It flowers midseason and gets 32 inches tall. The foliage is bronze colored during the spring and early summer.

'Elisabeth van Veen' (Elisabeth) — Another newer Van Veen plant is dark raspberry, it was introduced about 10 years ago. It is always very popular in the trade when it blooms. It reaches 28 inches and flowers during the midseason. The leaves are dark green.

'Montgomery' — This is an excellent full-plumed dark red with dark foliage. A sport of 'Dusseldorf' it reaches 28 inches and flowers midseason.

'Red Sentinel' — The Dutch Research Center in Boskoop, Holland calls this the best of the dark reds. When grown in the shade, the seed pods stay burgundy colored until very late in the season. It is the only red that does this, all the others turn brown. It has dark foliage and gets 30 inches tall. It flowers late midseason.

SIMPLICIFOLIA GROUP

'Aphrodite' — The bright carmine panicle is wide based and slightly arching. As it comes into bloom it has two-toned effect as the buds are rose colored. The foliage is lightly copper colored. A mid-sized variety, it rises to 24 inches and flowers late midseason.

'Hennie Graafland' — A vigorous growing light pink that flowers late midseason. In flower it is 18 inches tall. The foliage is very dark green and stays compact.

SPECIES

***chinensis* 'Dark Visions'** — This is a sport that Dave Beattie found in a block of 'Visions'. We both agree this is the best, of the best. At 18 inches the flower is dark purple and very full, flowering late midseason. It is not yet available to the public, but should be at some further date. Van Veen has a 'Red Visions' coming to the United States in 2002. It may be a similar sport to 'Visions', we have not seen this yet but the description is very similar.

The following is a summation of our observations of many of the traditional species and cultivars of *Astilbe* that we have grown over the years.

ARENDsii GROUP

'Amerika' (America) — lavender pink, 28 inches, midseason, Zone 3.

'Amethyst' — light violet, 40 inches. midseason, Zone 3.

'Anita Pfeiffer' — soft lavender rose, 30 inches, midseason, Zone 3

'Augustleuchten' — red, 28 inches, late midseason, Zone 3,

'Bergkristall' — white. 36 inches, midseason, Zone 3.

'Bonanza' — rose-red, 42 inches. late midseason. Zone 3.

'Bonnie' — rose-red. 28 inches, midseason, Zone 3, Blanchette Gardens 2001 introduction

'Brautschleier' (Bridal Veil) —white, 36 inches, midseason, Zone 3.

'Bumalda' — blush, 28 inches, early midseason, dark foliage, Zone 3.

'Cattleya Dunkel' — dark pink, 42 inches, midseason, Zone 3.

- 'Ceres' — light lilac, 36 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Crimson King' — dark rose, 30 inches, dark foliage, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Diamant' (Diamond) — white, 32 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Drayton Glory' — pale pink, 28 inches, early midseason, very much like 'Peach Blossom', Zone 3.
- 'Elizabeth Bloom' — soft pink, 28 inches, early midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Else Schluck' — light red, 28 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Etna' — red, 28 inches, dark foliage, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Fanal' — deep red, early midseason, 18 inches, dark foliage, Zone 3.
- 'Fata Morgana' — rose, 36 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Fedерsee' — rose, 24 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Feur' (Fire) — coral-red, 28 inches, late midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Flamingo' — pink, 18 inches, midseason, Zone 4.
- 'Fleur' — rose-red, 30 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Frieda Klapp' — carmine-purple, 30 inches, late midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Gertrud Brix' — pink, 28 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Gloria' — light rose, 30 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Gloria Purpurea' — rose-red, 34 inches, dark foliage, late-midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Glory Red' — reddish, 28 inches, midseason, dark foliage, Zone 3.
- 'Glut' (Glow) — dark red, dark foliage, 32 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Granat' — dark rose, 28 inches, early midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Grete Pungel' — tight pink plumes, 24 inches, early midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Harmony' — light rose flowers, 24 inches, dark foliage, late midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Hildegard' — rose, 28 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Hyazinth' (Hyacinth) — lilac-rose, 30 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Ingrid vom Stein' — rose, 24 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Irrlicht' — white, 24 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Jo Ophorst' — lilac-rose, 36 inches, late, Zone 3.
- 'Kobold' — rose, 8 inches, late midseason, Zone 4.
- 'Kriernhilde' — lavender-pink, 35 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Kvele' (Kwell) — dark lilac-rose, 32 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Lachskönigin' (Salmon Queen) — salmon-pink, 30 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Lili Goos' — rose-pink, 36 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Maggie Daley' — purple-rose, 32 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Mars' — light rose, 24 inches, early-midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Mont Blanc' — white, 28 inches, early midseason, Zone 3.

- 'Opergartner Jurgens'** — dark red, 24 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Örestad'** — red, 28 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Peach'** — salmon-pink, 32 inches, midseason, dark foliage, Zone 3.
- 'Peaches and Cream'** — light pink, 36 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Pink Curtsey'** — rose-pink, 16 inches, late midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Rosenschleier'** — light pink, 36 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Rotlicht' (Red Light)** — red, 28 inches, dark foliage, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Rosa Perle'** — soft pink, 28 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Rot Cattleya'** — dark pink, 42 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Rubin'** — carmine-rose, 36 inches, late midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Sarma'** — white, 30 inches, dark foliage, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Snowdrift'** — white, 24 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Spartan'** — dark red, 28 inches, dark foliage, Zone 3.
- 'Spinell'** — carmine-red, 32 inches, midseason, dark foliage, Zone 3.
- 'Venus'** — very light rose, 42 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Weisse Gloria'** — (White Gloria)
- 'White Queen'** — white, 28 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Weisse Perle'** — white, 28 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Zuster Theresa' (Sister Theresa)** — pale pink, 24 inches, Zone 3.
- 'Zuster Theresa Sport' (Sister Teresa Sport)** — pink, 24 inches, Zone 3.

CRISPA GROUP

- 'Gnom'** — lilac-pink, 6 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Lollipop'** — light pink, 15 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Perkeo'** — rose, 10 inches, midseason, crisp foliage, Zone 5.

JAPONICA GROUP

- 'Avalanche'** — white, 30 inches, early midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Bremen'** — dark rose, 28 inches, Midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Bronzlaub'** — blush, 24 inches, midseason, red foliage, Zone 3.
- 'Cotton Candy'** — deep pink, 24 inches, Zone 3.
- 'Deutschland'** — white, 18 inches, early, Zone 3.
- 'Düsseldorf'** — red, 28 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Düsseldorf Sport'** — rose-pink, 28 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Emden'** — lilac, 28 inches, early midseason, Zone 3.
- 'Europa' (early form)** — pink, 28 inches, early, Zone 3.
- 'Gladstone'** — white, 36 inches, midseason, Zone 3.

- 'Helsingborg'** — red, 30 inches, late midseason, Zone 3.
'Koblenz' — red, 28 inches, midseason, needs some shade, Zone 3.
'Köln' — red, 28 inches, dark foliage, midseason, Zone 3.
'Mainz' — dark lilac-pink, 24 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
'Möwe' — light rose, 24 inches, early-midseason, Zone 3.
'Peach Blossom' — light pink, 30 inches, early, Zone 3. fragrant.
'Rheinland' — carmine-rose, 24 inches, early midseason, Zone 3.
'Queen of Holland' — white, dark foliage, 28 inches, early, Zone 3.
'Vesuvius' — deep rose-red, 28 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
'Washington' — white, 22 inches, early, Zone 3.

SIMPLICIFOLIA GROUP

- 'Alba'** — white with pink blush, late midseason. 18 inches. Zone 3.
'Atrorosea' — light rose, 18 inches, late midseason, Zone 4.
'Becky Lynn' — lavender-pink. 18 inches, early midseason, Zone 3, Blanchette Gardens introduction.
'Bronce Elegans' (Bronze Elegans) — light pink, 18 inches, late midseason, Zone 3.
'Carnea' — flesh pale, 18 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
'Darwin's Dream' — pink, 15 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
'Darwin's Favourite' — pink, 15 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
'Darwin's Margot' — pink, 16 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
'Darwin's Snow Sprite' — white, 12 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
'Dunkellachs' — deep salmon pink, 14 inches, July, Zone 3.
'Dunkellachs Tall' — deep salmon pink, 20 inches, July, Zone 3.
'Eden's Odysseus' — light pink, 22 inches, midseason, Zone 3
'Inshriach Pink' — soft rose, 10 inches, late midseason, Zone 4.
'Jacqueline' — light pink, 28 inches, late midseason, Zone 3.
'Praecox' — shell pink, 16 inches, late midseason, Zone 3.
'Praecox Alba' — white, 18 inches, late midseason, Zone 3.
'Pink Lightning' — light pink, 16 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
'Rosea' — light rose, 18 inches, late midseason, Zone 3.
'Siska' — light pink, 12 inches late midseason, Zone 3.
'Sprite' — light pink, 15 inches, late midseason, Zone 3.
'Sugar Plum' — pink, 24 inches, early midseason, Zone 3.
'Touch of Pink' — light pink, 15 inches, midseason, Zone 3.

'William Buchanan' — blush, 8 inches, dark green foliage, July, Zone 4.

'White Wings' — white, 15 inches, midseason, Zone 4,

THUNBERGI GROUP

'Betsy Cuperus' — pink arching plumes. 36 inches. late midseason, Zone 3.

'Moerheimii' — white arching plume, 36 inches, late midseason, Zone 4.

'Moerheim's Glory' — pale pink, 72 inches, late midseason, Zone 4.

'Prof. Van der Wielen' — white. 36 inches, arching plumes., Zone 4.

'Red Charm' — arching red plumes, 36 inches, late midseason, Zone 4.

'Straussenfedder' (Ostrich Plume) — salmon-pink, arching, 36 inches, Zone 4

SPECIES, AND OTHER TAXA

bifernata — creamy-white plumes, 48 inches, midseason, American native, Zone 4.

chinensis — lavender-purple, 36 inches, late, Zone 4.

'Christian' — lilac-pink, 18 inches, late, Zone 5.

'Finale' — light rose, 20 inches, late, Zone 3.

'Frankentroll' — lavender-pink, 30 inches, late, Zone 4.

'Frulich' — white, 30 inches, early, Zone: 3.

'Intermezzo' — salmon-pink, 20 inches, late, Zone 3.

'King Albert' — white, 36 inches, red foliage, midseason, Zone 3.

'Korean Splendorrose' — purple, 48 inches, late, Zone 3.

'Loie' — light pink, 15 inches, late, Zone 3.

'Paradise Pink' — bright rose-red, 28 inches, early midseason, Zone 3.

'Purpurkerze' (Purple Candles) — purple, 42 inches, late, Zone 3.

'Serenade' — lilac-purple, 15 inches, late, Zone 3.

'Spatsommer' — light rose, 28 inches, late, Zone 3.

'Pumila' — lavender, 12 inches, late, Zone 3.

'Purple Glory' — rose-purple, 28 inches, late, Zone 3

'Raspberry Pink' — rose-pink, 24 inches, late, Zone 4.

'Rutherfed Ruby' - dark rose, 32 inches, midseason, Zone 3.

'Superba' — rose-purple, 40 inches, late, Zone 3.

'Swiss Glow' — purple, 24 inches, late midseason, Zone 3.

'Trulikon' — light rose, 16 inches, late, Zone 3.

'Veronica Klose' — purple-rose, 20 inches, late, Zone 3.

'Visions' — light purple, 18 inches, midseason, Zone 3.

'Visions in Pink' — lavender-pink, 18 inches, mid season, Zone 3.

- var. davidii** — rose-purple, 42 inches, late, Zone 4.
- glaberrima var. saxatilis** — blush-white, 6 inches, midseason, Zone 4.
- 'Peter Barrow'** — white, 14 inches, late midseason, Zone 4.
- fujisanensis** — white, 12 inches, midseason, Zone 4.
- 'Pink Fuji'** — light pink, 12 inches, midseason, Zone 3, Blanchette Gardens introduction.
- grandis** — pale pink to white, to 120 inches, late midseason, Zone 6.
- japonica** — white, 24 inches, very early, Zone 4.
- koreana** — white, 28 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
- microphylla** — very light pink, 30 inches, late midseason, Zone 4.
- 'Tall White'** — white, 42 inches, late midseason, Zone 4.
- rivularis** — lavender, 42 inches, late midseason, Zone 6
- ×**rosea 'Queen Alexandra'** — light rose, 24 inches, midseason, Zone 3.
- thunbergii var. hachihensis** — rose-purple, 42 inches, late, Zone 4.
- simplicifolia** — white, 10 inches, uncut leaves, late midseason, Zone 6.
- thunbergii var. congesta** — white, 42 inches, arching plume, midseason, Zone 4
- yakushimensis** — Pale pink, 2 inches, late midseason, Zone 5.