

# It's a Gardener's World!

Michaelmas, or the Feast of Michael and All Angels, is celebrated on the 29<sup>th</sup> September every year. We are moving into autumn. The harvest is more or less complete. The days will soon be much shorter, colder and darker. Just as it might feel that the darkness is taking over, we can celebrate a festival of light – the feast of St Michael the Archangel and all the angels in heaven. So it seems appropriate that today's 'Tale from the Garden' is all about the 'Michaelmas Daisy'.



The Michaelmas Daisy is, in fact, the Aster - a daisy-like perennial with starry-shaped flower heads that can be found in a rainbow of colours – white, red, pink, purple, lavender and blue, with mostly yellow centres. They bring delightful beauty to the garden in late summer and autumn, when many of our summer blooms may be fading. Asters are supposedly able to notice weather changes. The presence of closed petals is supposed to be a sign of imminent rain!

The aster is named after the Greek word for 'star' and, if you look at the shape of the flower, it's clear to see why. It's no surprise that September's birth flower is the aster which is said to represent both love and daintiness. The flowers are also associated with wisdom, patience, and faith.

With their wildflower beauty and lush texture, asters have long been considered an enchanted flower. In Ancient Greece, the "star-flower" was believed to be sacred to the gods and so wreaths of asters were placed on their altars. In ancient times, it was thought that the perfume from their burning leaves could drive away evil serpents. Aster leaves were burned to frighten away serpents in medieval Europe and roots were crushed and fed to bees in poor health. Although the early English name was "starwort," later the flower was named "Michaelmas Daisy" as it blooms around St. Michaelmas Day in September. As it falls near the equinox, the day is associated with the beginning of autumn and the shortening of days; in England, it is one of the "quarter days".

There are traditionally four "quarter days" in a year - Lady Day on the 25<sup>th</sup> March, Midsummer on the 24<sup>th</sup> June, Michaelmas on the 29<sup>th</sup> September & Christmas on the 25<sup>th</sup> December. They are spaced three months apart, on religious festivals, usually close to the solstices or equinoxes. They were the four dates on which new servants were hired or land was exchanged and debts were paid.

The act of giving a Michaelmas Daisy symbolises saying farewell, perhaps in the same way as Michaelmas Day is seen to say farewell to the productive season & welcome in the new cycle of farming. It used to be said that harvest had to be completed by Michaelmas. Traditionally, in the British Isles, a well fattened goose, fed on the stubble from the fields after the harvest, is eaten to protect against financial need in the family for the next year; and as the saying goes:

*"Eat a goose on Michaelmas Day,  
Want not for money all the year".*

Sometimes the day was also known as "Goose Day" and goose fairs were held. Even now, the famous Nottingham Goose Fair is still held on or around the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October. Part of the reason goose is eaten is that it was said that when Queen Elizabeth 1 heard of the defeat of the Armada, she was dining on goose and resolved to eat it on Michaelmas Day. Others followed suit. It could also have developed through the role of Michaelmas Day, being that debts were due - tenants requiring a delay in payment may have tried to persuade their landlords with gifts of geese!

In Scotland, St Michael's Bannock, or Struan Micheil (a large scone-like cake) is also created. This used to be made from cereals grown on the family's land during the year, representing the fruits of the fields, and is cooked on a lamb skin, representing the fruit of the flocks. The cereals are also moistened with sheep's milk, as sheep are deemed the most sacred of animals. As the Struan is created by the eldest daughter of the family, the following is said:

“Progeny and prosperity of family, Mystery of Michael, Protection of the Trinity”

Through the celebration of the day in this way, the prosperity and wealth of the family was assured for the coming year!

But who was this St Michael?

St Michael is one of the principal biblical angelic warriors, protector against the dark of the night and the Archangel who fought against Satan and his evil angels. As Michaelmas is the time that the darker nights and colder days begin – the edge into winter – the celebration of Michaelmas is associated with encouraging protection during these dark months. It was believed that negative forces were stronger in darkness and so families would require stronger defences during the later months of the year.

Sometimes we think of angels as sort of floating around in white and so full of heaven that they don't understand us human beings and the struggles we go through – a sort of warm & fuzzy heavenly being. But St Michael the archangel is far from 'warm & fuzzy'! He is often pictured with a large sword and one of his names is 'Captain of the Host of the Lord'. He doesn't fight in human wars, but he constantly fights against evil. He points people to the light when they are in darkness, he protects people when they are in trouble. Always, he wants to see God's will done in the world and he works to bring this about. The angels love God and bring joy and strength to us to help us to follow Jesus. In Revelations 12 v7-12, Michael & his angels fought against the dragon (Satan). St Michael is proactive against evil in all its forms, showing himself to be a servant of God and 'on our side' to help us.

You might even know a 'real' person who, in the here & now, displays angelic qualities - someone who is protective, someone who brings joy & someone who stays strong in the face of difficulties. In the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic we applauded our NHS staff & care-workers for their 'angelic' acts of kindness, courage & dedication. We might feel we have our own 'Guardian Angel' - someone who takes it upon themselves to protect & guide us, someone who looks after us pastorally & offers prayers on our behalf.

So on the 29<sup>th</sup> September let's give thanks for all angels: angels bring messages: they warn people and they protect people and they guide people to serve God. They are different from us and mysterious and we can't normally see them, but when we hear about them (& see their actions in 'real' people), we get a tiny glimpse of heaven.