



CULTIVATION NOTES

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Fringed Gentian

Gentianopsis crinita (Froelich) Ma

Family Gentianaceae

A Rhode Island Native Plant

by William R. Eddleman

Fringed Gentian heralds the end of the wildflower season in late fall. Its vivid blue flowers with ragged edges are a highlight of wet meadows, bogs, and other moist sites where it does not encounter too much competition from other plants. Such sites are limited today because of wetland drainage and old field succession, so Fringed Gentian is a rare plant in Rhode Island. Fringed Gentian is a biennial, forming a rosette of leaves in its first year and blooming in its second fall. Plants die after setting seed, but readily reseed given ideal moist, sunny conditions. The flowers are among the largest in the genus, reaching 2 1/2" across, and are borne at the tips of stems up to 3' tall. One plant may have up to 100 flowers. Leaves are simple, pointed, and about 3" long and 1/2" wide. Plants often bloom after the earliest frosts have fallen, and seeds do not ripen until November.

The rarity of any other wildflowers in October and the beauty of its large blue flowers make this rare plant one of the gems of our flora. Indeed, William Cullen Bryant, 19th century poet, was so inspired by this flower that he penned a tribute, *To the Fringed Gentian*, which reads, in part:

Thou waitest late and com'st alone,
When woods are bare and birds are flown,
And frosts and shortening days portend
The aged year is near its end.

Then doth thy sweet and quiet eye
Look through its fringes to the sky,
Blue--blue--as if that sky let fall
A flower from its cerulean wall.

In common with other gentians, Fringed Gentian is not among the easiest wildflowers to grow, but the rewards of coaxing it into bloom are worth it. Plant Fringed Gentian in the front of wildflower or perennial borders. Groupings of several plants are the most effective, and individual plants can be spaced 1 1/2 to 2 feet apart. Plant with other moisture-loving wild plants in organic soils. Companion plants with yellow flowers or ferns make an attractive contrast. The requirement of moist soil necessitates regular watering in sites that do not receive even moisture. Soil may be improved by adding rotted leaves or compost, and plants do best in neutral or slightly acidic soils. Fringed Gentian requires sun, so plant in a site that receives full sun or midday sun. Gentians make excellent cut flowers in fall arrangements.





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Biennial. Sky blue flowers in late September to mid-October, 2 1/2", base tubular and tips with fringed petals, borne in the upper leaf axils of stems 4-36" tall, one to 100 per plant. Flowers open only on sunny days. Leaves entire, triangular, and with rounded base and pointed tips. Grows in sunny, moist sites such as open wet meadows or bogs. Seedlings form rosettes their first year.

Propagation from divisions: Plants cannot be vegetatively propagated because of their biennial growth habit. Propagation is therefore exclusively by seed.

Seed Collection: Seed is borne in capsules on short stems, with the dried corolla surrounding the capsule at maturity. Each capsule may contain hundreds of 1-2 mm winged, brown seeds. Collect capsules in late October or early November after the first hard freeze, when they begin to split and curl at the tip. Store capsules in a bag and tap gently to remove the seeds. Store seeds in a sealed container and refrigerate. If stored in this manner, seeds remain viable for up to 4 years.

Propagation from seed: Sow seeds in late spring in flats placed outside in a sheltered spot or in a cold frame. A seed starting mixture of 2 parts peat to 1 part sand insures adequate drainage. Sow seeds on a layer of milled sphagnum moss spread 1/4" deep on the top of the medium. Mist the surface often to keep the surface from drying out. Germination should occur in about 2 weeks. When roots of seedlings reach the bottom of the flat, lift them carefully and transplant in groups of 2 into 3" containers filled with the same mixture used for seed starting. Plants may be moved to 6" pots as they grow larger. Take care not to damage the roots during transplanting. Keep seedlings well watered and overwinter in pots in a cold frame or protected site. Move the plants to the location where they will flower the next spring.

Cultivation: Fringed Gentian requires even moisture, so the soil should never be allowed to dry out. Well-drained organic soils are ideal. If the soil is heavy, mix sand or fine gravel in to promote drainage. Mulch deeply with peat, rotted leaves, or compost and water frequently. A streamside site, seep, or wet spring is an ideal location for Fringed Gentian. Plants should be planted in full sun in moist situations, but light shade with at least a half day of sun may be better where the soil is prone to drying. Because Fringed Gentian is a biennial, seedlings should be started annually if blooms are desired each year.

RIWPS Policy: Never dig plants in the wild without written permission of the landowner. Take seeds sparingly.

My own notes:

References

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