



CULTIVATION NOTES

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Wild Columbine

Aquilegia canadensis L.

A Rhode Island Native Plant

by Sally Snow-Eklund and Lisa L. Gould

Family Ranunculaceae

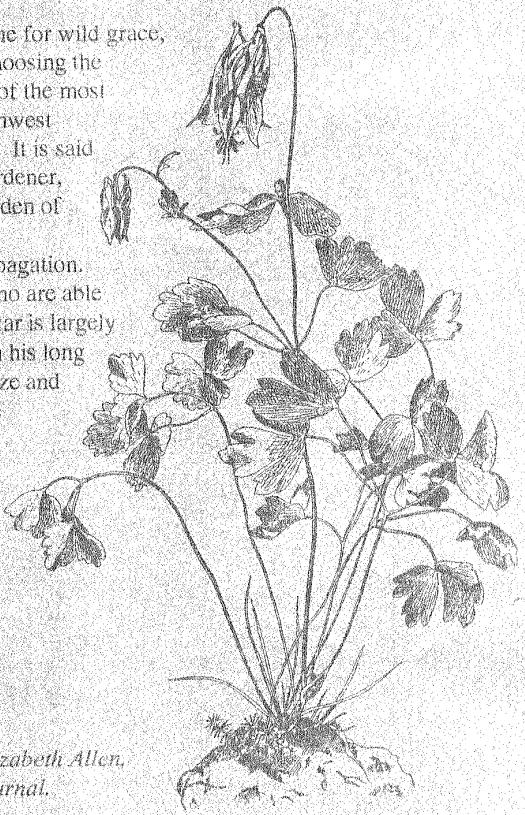
About 100 species of herbaceous perennials in the genus *Aquilegia* grow in north temperate zones, but *Aquilegia canadensis* L. is the only columbine native to the eastern United States. "Columbine" is Middle English, derived from the medieval Latin word *columbina*, meaning dovelike (from the resemblance of the inverted flower to a cluster of doves).

Columbines are erect branching plants having divided leaves resembling large-scale maidenhair fern. The flowers are funnel-shaped with spurred petals which appear on tall stems above the foliage. In *Aquilegia canadensis*, the five petals are red with an inner yellow layer, surrounded by a whorl of five red sepals; brilliant yellow stamens and pistils protrude from the center of the flower. Although you are mostly likely to find Wild Columbine, like the cultivated columbines, dancing in the late spring breezes from mid-May through June, in Rhode Island you may, to your delight, come across a patch on a sheltered ledge as early as late April.

"Among all the flowers that bloom none outshine the wild Columbine for wild grace, untrammeled and unconventional beauty or the idyllic nature of its habitat--choosing the strong ground of the inner woodlands for its favorite abiding place. It is one of the most pleasant of our summer visitors and is at home from Nova Scotia to the Northwest territory, and from Florida to the Rocky Mountains. It is a child of America. It is said that during the reign of Charles I, a young colonist, kinsman of the king's gardener, sent to him from Virginia specimens of the plant for the adornment of the garden of Hampton Court.

Like most flowers it has made remarkable provision for its own propagation. Its nectar it hides far back in its little cornucopias where only those insects who are able to carry its pollen to some other flower can partake of its sweets. So the nectar is largely reserved for the big bumblebee, and the little hummingbird. The former with his long tongue and strong legs can hang upside down as gaily as an acrobat on a trapeze and drink its nectar while doing so. And the ruby-throated hummingbird finds the inverted position of the honeycup no disadvantage. Some of the smaller bees have learned of the discrimination that the Columbine practices against them through its length and narrowness of neck, and frequently they may be seen tipping holes in the tips of the petals and getting the nectar without their toll of pollen-carrying to the flower. As a defensive measure against this rape of her sweets the Columbine secretes a bitter juice that often foils the invaders. Dr. Prior declares that the Columbine got its name because of the resemblance of its nectaries to the heads of pigeons in a ring around a dish, a favorite device of ancient artists."

This "plant story" is from the papers of Harriet Bennett Jencks, who lived from 1835 to 1919. Harriet's journal was found by RIWPS member Elizabeth Allen, who does not know the source of the stories Harriet Jencks copied into her journal.





Aquilegia canadensis L. Wild Columbine
Family Ranunculaceae

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Aquilegia canadensis L. Wild Columbine

Perennial. Red and yellow spurred flowers, 1 1/2", with projecting stamens. Blooms late April into June. Compound leaves alternate, long-petioled, divided into three leaflets which are usually deeply lobed. 1'-2.5' tall, in moist to dry woods and on rocky cliffs and ledges.

Propagation from divisions: Divide mature plants in the fall, using a sharp knife to separate the crowns forming the woody rhizome. Wild Columbine does not transplant easily, so handle with care to avoid breaking the roots. Plant and water the divisions immediately. Young plants may be divided in late summer or early spring.

Propagation from seed: Wild Columbine seeds mature fairly rapidly after blooming. The seeds from each flower develop in five papery follicles, which are green at first but usually turn brown as the seeds ripen. When mature the follicles split open at the top and the shiny, black seeds are dispersed when the wind blows or an animal brushes against the plant.

To collect the seed, monitor the follicles and begin collecting as soon as the seeds turn black. Phillips recommends cutting a ripe fruit stalk at the base and placing it in a paper bag to mature for a few more days; then the bag can be shaken to release the seeds. If the seeds are to be stored, place them in a dry, sealed container and refrigerate them. When ready to sow, mix the seeds with a little damp vermiculite and refrigerate for another 3-4 weeks. Then spread the mixture evenly over a sowing medium in a growing flat, pressing the soil down lightly to keep the seeds in place. Do not let the soil surface dry completely; do not fertilize the seedlings, as this may cause foliage burn. After the plants have developed a vigorous root system--in 6-8 weeks--transplant into individual pots and then outside into the garden.

Ripe seeds may also be sown immediately, into a prepared seedbed outside; they should germinate the following spring.

Cultivation: Best used in the herbaceous border or rock garden, with mass plantings in the wild garden recommended. Columbines are usually considered easy to grow, liking moist woodsy garden soil in sun to partial shade. Wild Columbine does best in a not-too-rich or moist soil, in light shade; during a dry summer the plants will do best if watered weekly. To get continued flowering, deadhead regularly, leaving a few heads to set seed. They self-sow freely, germinating well where the soil is disturbed; many gardeners have found that scratching the soil near a Wild Columbine will provide a bare patch for seeds to germinate.

If you also grow cultivated columbines nearby, you may find some interesting new color combinations, as columbines hybridize easily.

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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