

## Cardinal Flower

*Lobelia cardinalis*

Family: Campanulaceae

### An Update

by Dorothy G. Swift

If you check the RIWPS website or your own collection of Cultivation Notes, you will see that an earlier Cultivation Note for *Lobelia cardinalis* was written by Erika Poggie (1989). With this issue we are updating the information a bit and using a computer-friendly format.

#### Cardinal Flower as a hummingbird magnet

Cardinal Flower blooms from midsummer into fall over a wide part of the United States. A recent article in *Wildflora RI* (Swift, 2012) describes using *L. cardinalis* to attract hummingbirds to your garden. Doing so also guarantees pollination of the flowers.



#### CULTIVATION

##### Growing conditions: Reference information versus personal experience

Cardinal Flower will self-sow readily in our region in moist areas. Shade is often cited as being necessary. Such conditions allow it to compete with other seeds in the wild but are not mandatory for your own property. Start with Cardinal Flower plants, available for purchase at our RIWPS June plant sale. A sunny location with good garden soil that can be watered, as is needed for most perennial plants, will be a preferred location for good growth and bloom. I have observed that plants in shady areas will survive but not grow or bloom as well as those in sun. (This is not an invitation to place plants in full sun and wind exposure with little attention to watering. A little shade, such as comes from a nearby house or trees in the area is fine, but my plants, grown from seed of local origin, flower best with a fair amount of sun). This information may be useful for those who have not had good success with Cardinal Flower: plants in our region do not need the really moist conditions and the shade that many reference sources cite as necessary.

##### Self sowing on your own property

If you have several *L. cardinalis* plants on your property, you should eventually see some volunteer seedlings. Learn to recognize them. When young, you can easily move them to a desirable location. On the other hand, because Cardinal Flower is prolific in seed production, you might want to remove some of the seed stalks before maturity if you have several plants. Doing so will help avoid having an excessive number of seedlings produced. The plant produces small round capsules several weeks after flowers finish. The plant is long flowering, so you may find mature seed capsules near the bottom of a flower stalk that still has fresh red flowers at the top of the stalk.

I have not experienced *L. cardinalis* to be short-lived, as some references report. Cullina (2000) states that the original roots and flowering stalk die at the end of the season, but new rosettes of leaves and new roots develop from the axils of basal leaves in the fall. Therefore, it is important to prevent fallen autumn leaves from covering the plant base. If you take this precaution, your plants can be long-lived. I have found that a first-year plant may or may not bloom, and its flowering stalk might be 12 to 16 inches tall. In future years, there will be more flowering stalks and they will be taller. It may be necessary to stake the taller stalks. It may also be necessary to use a critter repellent if rabbits or woodchucks are around. Animals seem to be able to bend a stalk down to the ground and then nibble on the flowering end.

## PROPAGATION

**From seed (preferred method):** Fresh seed, or even seed stored under refrigeration for several years, will readily germinate when sown. The seed is tiny and should not be covered when sowing, as it requires light to germinate. At Seed Starters East, seed germinates readily in a cool greenhouse, except during the dead of winter. Seedlings grow so well that we usually use potting soil, rather than a very fine germination mix, for sowing seed. Spread the seed sparsely and expose it to light. We mist the soil surface generously after the seed is sown, and try to cover the seed container. (You can use a takeout food container with holes drilled in the bottom and utilize its semi-transparent cover; or put pots or seeding rectangles into a plastic self-sealing bag; or sow a flat with seed and use a matching plastic cover). When many of the seeds have germinated, remove the plastic cover.

After seedlings develop true leaves, they can be transplanted. If they are still quite small, we usually put several seedlings in one container and then move them later to separate pots.

**Stem Cuttings:** Cuttings with several sets of leaves may be taken in mid-summer. Prepare a rooting medium of peat and perlite or sand and perlite. Treat the bottom of the stem with a rooting hormone. Make a hole in the medium with a pencil, insert the cutting and firm the medium around it. Root under mist or in a container that you place in a plastic self-sealing bag after misting the pot of cuttings. Expose to bright light but not direct sunlight, unless you have mist. Cullina (2000) is our authority on this plant, and he recommends propagation by seeds or by cuttings.

A few sources mention two other methods of propagation.

**Division:** An established plant will have a clump of basal rosettes. Reference sources state that these can be separated in spring or fall and then replanted. It is important to keep the divisions well-watered so that they can become established. I will mention that the one time that I attempted this, I lost all of the plants. This is no doubt an effective method, but it must be timed carefully so that the tiny divisions can be grown on to produce substantial root systems.

**Layering:** In midsummer, bend the stem over to lie on the ground. Hold the tip down with a stake or stone. Cover the stem with a quarter-inch of soil. Keep it moist. New roots and shoots will form at the leaf nodes. These can be cut into separate plants in the fall to be replanted. I have not personally tried this method.

### References:

William Cullina. 2000. *The New England Wild Flower Society Guide to Growing and Propagating Wildflowers of the United States and Canada*. Houghton Mifflin, Boston.

Erika Poggie. "Cardinal Flower Cultivation Note." RIWPS Cultivation Note #5, September 1989. Available at [www.riwps.org](http://www.riwps.org)

Dorothy G. Swift. "Cardinal Flower and Hummingbirds," *Wildflora RI*, (Winter 2012) 1-2.

## RIWPS Policy

Never dig plants in the wild or without the written permission of the landowner. Take seeds sparingly.

Note: "*Cultivation Note*" is a regular feature in *WildfloraRI*, the *Bulletin of the Rhode Island Wild Plant Society*. If you would be interested in writing a future cultivation note article or have suggestions of plants you would like to see included, please contact Dick Fisher at [Richard.Fisher2@cox.net](mailto:Richard.Fisher2@cox.net). The previous cultivation note topics are listed on the website and there is an easy to follow set of guidelines for the format of your article.

— WildfloraRI Editorial Committee

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