

NATURAL PROPAGATION

by **Marty Fisher**

Late fall is a great time to think about propagating perennial wild plants from seed. Gardening chores are finished and the garden is looking bare and bleak in its winter mode. New additions will be needed to fill in the blanks, and the best idea would be to grow your own plants. The following plan will help you produce new perennials with little equipment and, better yet, to do so naturally.

If you haven't collected seeds as they ripened in the fall, you may still be able to find some. Check to see if the seed capsule is still upright. Most seeds are firm or fairly hard and should easily fall out. If the seeds have already dispersed, it might be possible to purchase the desired ones at the nursery or mail-order them. Another idea would be to check for seeds from a neighbor or fellow gardener whose flowers you have been admiring.



Myrica pennsylvanica (Bayberry)

Most seeds are ready to be planted as is. If you cut the entire stalk and turn it upside down in a plastic bag, the seeds should fall neatly into the bottom of the bag. Sometimes collecting the ripe seed heads comes with the whole pod connected. Cleaning away all the excess is necessary before planting the individual seeds. This can be accomplished by passing the seeds through a wire sieve. If there is still more excess, place them in a shallow container and blow gently. The light dust should float away.

Some, however, have a protective covering that must be washed away. *Arisaema triphyllum* (Jack-in-the-Pulpit) and *Myrica pennsylvanica* (bayberry) are two that need this extra care. The Jacks should be put in a strainer under running water and rubbed gently to let the covering wash away. The bayberry should be put in a strainer and rubbed dry and the wax will fall below. The smell as you do this is very pleasant. For other plants check William Cullina's books for specific additional information.

Late fall after the first frost is the best time to start planting seeds. Gather some washed old pots with 4" or larger tops and good drainage holes. Fill the bottom with clean potting soil. Generously scatter seeds on top of this. Not all seeds will be viable so more is better than less. Top this off with a covering of light potting or germinating mix to allow the seeds to grow with ease. An idea, just in case you have four-footed yard companions who are collecting seeds for their winter stash: Cover the pots with a screen or fine mesh. Another suggestion would be to add fine sand to the top. Even aquarium gravel will work to discourage the seed seekers if you have large seeds. Water lightly.

Locate prepared pots on the north side of a building or a shady spot. This will keep them cold to frozen for most of the winter to prevent a freeze--thaw problem and also to keep them from drying out. Take a winter walk outside occasionally to be certain the pots have not been disturbed.

When the weather warms in late February or March, move the pots to a sunny spot. When you see the seedlings appear, mist or water carefully. Tiny seedlings will keel over with a heavy water flow so take care (and wear bifocals if necessary). Keep the tops moist but not soggy until you see a second set of leaves.

Now comes the fun part! Separate the tiny plants into individual pots, three or four in each one. (Several in a pot means that you won't have to look at an empty pot if one or two don't make the transfer.) At this point the seedlings have used up all their stored energy. Fertilize with a weak solution every third or fourth watering. Organic fertilizers are readily available and are a wonderful plant builder.

Perennials will grow at different rates. *Lupinus* species (Lupine) will pop up quickly, as will *Aquilegia* (Columbine),

and *Linum perenne* (Wild Flax). *Cardinalis digitalis* (Cardinal Flower) and *Aster novae-angliae* (New England Aster) will take their time. If you are up to a challenge try *Arisaema triphyllum* (Jack-in-the-Pulpit), *Lilium superbum* (Turk's Cap Lily), or *Allium cernuum* (Wild Onion). These produce bulbs which will only make a slender green blade the first year, a few more leaves the second year, and then in the third to fifth year a strong plant which will bloom. Keeping track of these perennials is a challenge but well worth it when they finally bloom. If you plant them in the garden be sure to mark the spot so you won't accidentally disturb them up while weeding.

***Lilium superbum* (Turk's Cap Lily)
with pods ready for harvesting, left, and
nursery pots holding the slender
green blades of seedlings**



Growing a perennial garden from seeds has many advantages. The savings of money and the volume produced will be substantial. Producing the exact plants you desire is rewarding. Making a contribution to the insect, butterfly, and bird community is admirable. But most of all, the satisfaction of knowing that the garden is completely your very own from seed to bloom is a reward in itself.

SEED SOURCES

Botanicalinterests.com

Vetmontwildflowerfarm.com

Check the web for New England Wildflower Seeds-29,000 choices

Local gardening stores

BOOKS

Cullina, William. *Growing and Propagating Wildflowers*. NEWFS, 2000.

Cullina, William. *Native Trees, Shrubs, and Vines*. NEWFS 2002.

Cullina, William. *Understanding Perennials*. NEWFS, 2008.

Leopold, Donald. *Native Plants of the Northeast*, Timber Press, 2005

Stuckey, Irene & Lisa Gould. *Coastal Plants from Cape Cod to Cape Canaveral*, 2000

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. 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.

Rhode Island Wild Plant Society

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