## A 'Go-to' Plant for Hummingbirds

One request I am repeatedly asked at our Spring Flower Fair on Mother's Day weekend is for plants that attract butterflies or the Ruby Throated Hummingbird. Of course, this question is often pared with suggestions on plants with a tolerance to deer browse, are native to Eastern North America and lastly, are easily grown in the home garden. There are actually several good answers to the question, but one of my 'go-to' suggestions is always Cardinal Flower, Lobelia cardinalis (pictured at right, mixed with one plant of *Lobelia siphilitica*).



Cardinal Flower is a member of the Campanula family or Campanulaceae and is native to North America with the exception of the more Northwesterly regions of the United States into Canada.



The genus Lobelia was first penned by the Swedish botanist and physician Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) in 1753. The name honors Matthias de L'Obel (1538-1616), who was a Flemish botanist and physician. Aside from looking at the medicinal properties of plants, which was the common practice during L'Obel's lifetime, he co-authored a paper on classifying plants by the foliar shape and arrangement. Not surprisingly, he was also among the first to take notice and publish the difference between the leaves of Monocots and Dicots! The genus Lobelia contains 414 species of herbaceous and woody species, many of which are native to tropical locations throughout the world. One common trait throughout the various species is the bilaterally symmetrical flowers, splitting the flower into an upper and lower 'lip' (pictured at left). Lobelia cardinalis was first described by Linnaeus in 1753. The species epithet refers not to the bird as I had always surmised, but to the red robes word by the Roman Catholic Cardinals.

As the species name implies, the flowers are typically red in color, although purple and on rare



appearing sequentially from bottom to top along unbranched floral stems or racemes. The racemes can reach to 1-4' in height depending upon the location. The lower 1/2 of the floral stem is clothed in deep green, lance-shaped foliage with a serrate margin. The leaves range from 1-4" in length and appear alternately along the stem. The remainder of the stem serves to attractively display the radially arranged red flowers that are 1-1.5" in diameter. As previously mentioned, the flowers are much beloved by Ruby Throated Hummingbirds (Archilochus colubris), but are also visited by the Black Swallowtail Butterfly (Papilio *polyxenes asterius*) and the Spicebush Swallowtail (Papilio troilus) that is featured in the picture above. These butterflies have sufficiently long tongues to reach the nectar at the base of the corolla. All the petals of a flower are collectively called a corolla. As the pollinators reach into the corolla to collect the nectar, the overarching anthers deposit pollen on the top of the head or body, which is transferred to the stigma of the next occasions, white flowered forms appear. As seen at left, the flowers consist of a smaller upper lip, containing two petals or lobs while the larger lower 'lip' contains three petals or lobes. The petals fuse to form a tubular, cup-like base wherein the nectaries are located. The nectaries yield a sugar rich fluid that serves as a lure to attracting various pollinators. Stretching up from the base of the flower and overarching the lower lip are 5 male stamens that surround a centrally located female style. The flower stems emerge from a basal rosette of foliage, with the flowers



visited flower. An ingenious way to ensure pollination and provide a lure to bring back the various pollinators, it also provides a lot of movement and animation for the gardener to enjoy!

Another interesting Lobelia to add to the garden is *Lobelia siphilitica*, the Great Blue Lobelia, pictured above at right. Once again, it was named by Linnaeus in 1753, and the rather interesting species epithet refers to the original, yet untrue notion that the plant was able to treat venereal disease. Often blooming a week or two later than its cousin, this plant is native to the eastern two thirds of North America and typically reaches heights of 1-3'. Aside from the different flower color, the plants are nearly identical in appearance and attract similar pollinators.

There are a number of dark red foliaged forms of *Lobelia cardinalis* on the market as well, including 'Victoria', which was one of the earlier selections along with 'New Moon Maroon'



(pictured at left, photo credit Lisa Stravinsky) that was found by Mr. James Brown at New Moon Nursery in Woodstown NJ and an ever so slightly darker form called 'Black Truffle' found in West Virginia. All of these forms offer attractive deep red foliage, but my preference still lies with the green foliage of the species; the beautiful red flowers add a wonderful accent to the garden and I find that the red foliage often diminishes the impact of the flowers! To my knowledge,

there are no selections of Lobelia siphilitica on the market.

Both species of *Lobelia* prefer soils that are damp to wet with ample amounts of organic matter. They will tolerate soils that dry out from time to time, but the plants will be shorter and less likely to produces seedlings. Following pollination, the flowers will yield green, quickly turning to brown seed capsules as the stems themselves slowly turn to tan with a green basal rosette of leaves remaining at the base. The round seed capsules develop small holes along the top, from which the fine seed is scattered as the stem rocks back and forth in the wind. From seed, the plants will appear as basal rosettes of foliage for the first 1-3 years before commencing to flower. *Lobelia cardinalis* will typically last 3-5 years in a garden setting, but its short life should not be considered a liability, as it produces ample seedlings to ensure the original plant will never be missed! The blue form typically last a little longer and naturally occurring crosses do occur, whereby the flowers assume a more maroon color than red. Due to the presence of toxic white alkaloids in the milky latex sap, the plants have proven to be deer resistant and the hungry gardener should resist any thought of foraging for a snack!

If your garden has a suitably moist location and you are in need of a shot of bright red or perhaps a more subtle blue flower for your Garden, both of these plants have proven to be delightful additions. Not only is the color a great asset, but watching Hummingbirds hover or butterflies flitter about the garden makes the two species a 'go-to' plant for gardeners who wish to attract and enjoy pollinators!



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