



Love Those Lobelias!

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

About now many of our gardens could use a new kick of color. An underused perennial that might offer just that touch are lobelias. These plants belong to the bellflower family and are comprised of at least 400 species. Various species are native to many of the temperate regions of the world including the United States. A number of the species, as well as named hybrids, make for exceptional late season ornamental appeal.

Most gardeners are familiar with the lovely blue annual lobelia (*L. erinus*). It is a wonderful edging plant coming in several shades of blue plus white and purple tones. Some cultivars trail more than others and are widely used in hanging baskets, window boxes and other containers. While annual lobelia hails from South Africa, many of the perennial species are native.

One of the most striking, and my favorite, of the perennial lobelias is the cardinal flower (*L. cardinalis*). It is a very widespread native plant ranging from New Brunswick south to Florida and west to Texas. The fiery red flowers have been noticed for centuries. In fact, it was first described by the English botanist, John Parkinson, in 1629. The Latin name, lobelia, was given by Charles Plumier in honor of the botanist, Matthias de l'Obel.

Like many members of this genus, the cardinal flower has simple leaves borne alternatively along its stems. The two-lipped, tubular, 1 ½-inch flowers are very attractive to hummingbirds and other pollinators. Flowers are 5-lobed and typically have 2 erect upper lobes and 3 lower lobes looking like they have formed a fan. There are a number of hybrids including 'Queen Victoria' with bronze foliage and flower stalks that could reach 5 feet in height.



Cardinal flower. Photo by dmp2023

The great blue lobelia (*L. siphilitica*), sometimes referred to as the blue cardinal flower, may also send up 5-foot-tall flower shoots although heights vary depending on hybrid selections. Stems are typically unbranched with 3- to 5-inch-long leaves. Plants are clump forming and hardy from zones 4 to 8. The 1-inch blue flowers begin to open later than the red cardinal flower. They are surrounded by leafy bracts and unfurl from the bottom of the flower stalk to the top putting on a show for about 4 weeks in late summer. 'Blue Peter' sports light blue flowers on 3-foot-tall plants. There are also some white cultivars. The Latin name for this plant comes from the fact that it was once thought of as a cure for syphilis.

Hybrid purple lobelia (*L x gerardii*) is a cross between the 2 previously mentioned perennial species. 'Vedrariensis' is a vigorous hybrid with 4 to 6 inch long, dark green, elliptical leaves and a large number of star-shaped, vibrant purple flowers on stems from 3 to 5 feet high. Clumps can reach 3 feet across.

For all their beauty, the perennial lobelias tend to be rather short-lived perennials. One beneficial characteristic, however, is that most of them will self-seed so leave a few spent flower stems and learn to recognize seedlings, which would likely germinate in the spring. The species will come true to seed but seeds from hybrids may not resemble the parent plant.

Lobelias appreciate a moist soil and usually do best when not baking in the sun all day. Their native habitats include moist meadows, pond or stream edges, and along the borders of woodlands. If possible, locate them where they will receive some shade from the late afternoon summer sun.

The long stems can be pinched in early June to promote branching. This will delay flowering somewhat, but plants will be more compact and bear more blossoms. Plants can be cut back in late fall after the foliage has died back. They can be covered over the winter with a light mulch like evergreen boughs.

Lobelias have few insect pests or disease problems. There might be some slug feeding in wet years. Deer leave plants alone as they contain a compound called lobeline that makes them unpalatable to most mammals. Bees, butterflies and hummingbirds, however, find lobelias irresistible.

If you're looking for some late summer color, give lobelias a try, You'll be glad you did. For questions about growing lobelia or for your gardening questions, contact the UConn Home & Garden Education at (877) 486-6271 or www.homegarden.cahnr.uconn.edu or your local Cooperative Extension Center.