

Bird Friendly Native Plant of the Month

JULY 2016

NC NATIVE PLANT SOCIETY

REEDY CREEK NATURE PRESERVE



Photos by Will Stuart

Lobelia cardinalis Cardinal Flower

If you want hummers... Plant Cardinal Flower!

Cardinal Flower blooms in late summer and the tubular scarlet flowers attract hummingbirds and long tongued butterflies such as spicebush swallowtail, eastern tiger swallowtail and cloudless sulphur.

Mature and happy plants are typically 4-5 feet tall, but can grow to 8 feet. Plant in groups of 3-5 to properly showcase their grandeur. Moisture loving companion plants include Blue Mistflower, Cinnamon Fern, Red Buckeye, Royal Fern, and Sweetbay Magnolia.

Success with *Lobelia*

Lobelia cardinalis thrives in moist, well drained soil. Piedmont clay soils hold water, but can become brick-hard when they dry out. Therefore, plant Cardinal Flower in partial shade with a light mulch, and water in

extended drought to keep plants looking their best. Take advantage of any depressions or moist spots in your landscape – it can take full sun if kept consistently moist. Stream banks, pond edges or rain gardens are natural places for *Lobelia cardinalis*.

The rosettes of the plant are semi-evergreen, so remove mulch in winter to allow self-seeding and to prevent winter rot.

History and Culture

The common name for *Lobelia cardinalis*, Cardinal Flower, appears to come from the color of the robes worn by Cardinals of the Roman Catholic church. And most of us would agree with Dr. Larry

Mellichamp, that Cardinal Flower is so beautiful, widely recognized, and grown, it could be our national flower.

According to Gil Nelson, Thomas Jefferson chose to use Cardinal Flower in his landscape, dedicating a full bed to the showy flowers.

While Native Americans used a tea from roots and leaves of *Lobelia cardinalis* for fever, colds, and stomach aches, chemical analysis points to toxicity in all parts of the plant. Therefore, do not ingest – instead appreciate the beauty of the plant, its ecological value, and leave the nectar sipping to the hummingbirds.

Bird Friendly Native Plant of the Month is a joint effort of the NC Native Plant Society and Audubon North Carolina.

