

Lobelia cardinalis Hummingbird Magnet

By Dorothy G. Swift

CARDINAL FLOWER, the common name for *Lobelia cardinalis*, is native all over the Northeast. In early July, its bright red flowers come into bloom on a vertical stalk and last for a number of weeks into late summer. *L. cardinalis* is not at all a rare plant, but the places where it occurs in natural stands are becoming fewer due to loss of habitat. In my own region in Rhode Island, it establishes and seeds itself in the wild in wet areas that have excellent sun exposure. It might be at the edge of a woodland, in a ditch next to a road, or in a wet meadow with a lot of surrounding herbaceous plants and a few shrubs. It can, however, grow happily in sunny spots and in profusion on your property and will flourish in good garden soil that is kept watered during dry periods. This is contrary to recommendations in literature, which advise a shady wet location. After I had observed that hummingbirds were attracted to the bright red cardinal flowers, I made extensive modifications in parts of my garden.

My plants of cardinal flower are all seed-grown, originating from a wild population in my town that grew in a wet area close to a road. (Unfortunately, road “improvements” have almost eliminated the cardinal flowers at that site.) I first grew it in a shaded area far from the house, following information from books. But when I had some extra plants, I put three plants within view of the patio. I was elated when I saw that hummingbirds were attracted to

the red flowers. I had tried various hummingbird feeders, but found it a hassle to keep the sugar solution fresh and to keep out insects and mold. I decided to just have more cardinal flower plants to supply hummingbird food. The cardinal flowers seed themselves modestly around my garden, so I moved seedlings to places in the sun and close to the patio, as well as further away—substantial groupings in numerous places near outdoor living space and in view of windows.

My prime place for hummingbirds is adjacent to the patio where multiple mature cardinal flower plants, placed between shrubs and perennials in two beds, edge the patio. Because cardinal flowers do not bloom until July, each year in May or June, I buy several plants of taller (3–4' stems) *Salvia* selections with bright pink, red, and purple flowers. The salvias bloom earlier (and also later) and

begin attracting hummers to the patio prior to the appearance of cardinal flower blossoms. My favorite salvia is ‘Mulberry Jam’ (not hardy), with early bright pink flowers that attract hummingbirds. I plant it in several places near the *L. cardinalis* plants. Tall salvias are important because cardinal flower spikes are tall, and the hummers go most easily to flowers that are up in the air, rather than near ground level. A cardinal flower plant in its first year might have a flowering stalk about 20" high; in the second year it might be 2–3', and, after that, 4' or taller. There will be multiple flowering spikes after the first year. Once hummers come to a location for flowers on taller stems, they may notice lower growing flowers nearby or even flowers in nearby containers. In the two beds bordering the patio, I now have many cardinal flowers. I can sit on the patio and watch a hummingbird come to sample flower

after flower several feet away. (If a second hummer arrives, they compete and one chases the other—with the result that both fly away).

In a second garden bed across a small stretch of lawn, I have more red cardinal flowers. This has been the site for some innovation. Several of the pink hybrid *Lobelia* ‘Monet Moment’ are growing there. A few *Lobelia siphilitica* showed up there on their own. These normally have blue flowers,



Bed on edge of patio. Several large clumps of *Lobelia cardinalis* with their tall flowering spikes. Between the clumps are a rhododendron and a tree peony with forget-me-nots at the edge.

but white flowering ones are not uncommon. *Lobelia siphilitica* doesn't attract hummingbirds, so I allow only a few of them to remain in that bed. In full summer bloom with lots of red cardinal flower in this bed, there is additional color from the pink *L. 'Monet Moment'* and *Phlox paniculata*, white flower spikes of *Veronicastrum virginicum*, plus the blue and white *L. siphilitica*. The mix of colors is an aesthetic enhancement to that garden bed, however, hummingbirds seem to prefer the red cardinal flower blossoms. As a result of having the collection of *Lobelia* species and selections near one another, an occasional pale pink or almost white flowering seedling will grow and bloom.

Lobelia cardinalis is sometimes described as being short-lived in perennial gardens. However, I have found that plants survive for many years. The species does seed itself, so you have a ready source of new plants if you do not deadhead. The number of self-sown seedlings will depend upon the extent to which the garden conditions are suitable for seed germination. (Exposed soil is more favorable than bark-mulched beds, but my stone-mulched rock garden seems to be excellent also). I should warn that *L. siphilitica* is more than likely to appear in your garden as well, and it seeds itself more prolifically. You have to identify plants of the two species in order to maintain mostly *L. cardinalis* to attract hummers. (It takes careful study to differentiate between *L. siphilitica* and *L. cardinalis* plants when they are not in bloom, but there are differences in leaf shape and color and in plant habit). *L. cardinalis* that is in shady areas of my garden will survive but not thrive, so sun is a key feature for good growth and flowering. Nor have I observed hummingbirds at the plants in the shade. There may be more root competition in shaded areas, and my sunny watered garden



Bed on edge of patio, with a view straight-on of *Lobelia cardinalis* with their flowering spikes.

areas offer better growing conditions. In hotter climates, shade might be more important. *L. cardinalis* has wide distribution from the Northeast into the Midwest and the South and West. It is likely that genetic differences occur in plants from different eco-regions as a result of long-term genetic acclimation to differences in temperature, moisture, and soil type. In Rhode Island, the sunny locations that I describe have open sky above, but there are trees and a house nearby that provide shade during some hours and also protection from excess wind and sun. The garden beds have other perennial plants and rhododendrons, so they are watered regularly. In the wild, you don't see *L. cardinalis* plants growing in open, sunny fields—conditions where *Asclepias tuberosa* (butterfly weed) might flourish—but only in areas that might be wet fields or ditches with some moisture in summer. Incidentally, hummingbirds do go to butterfly weed and tall garden phlox also, but the bloom period for these is shorter than that of cardinal flower.

Plant breeders have used *L. cardinalis*, *L. siphilitica*, and a couple of more tender species to come up with plants that have flowers other than bright red, white, or blue, including pale pink, rose, salmon, burgundy, deep

purple. Some of these colorful hybrid lobelia can be found in the named Compliment or Fan series. They are fine to look at, and a beautiful addition to a garden bed, just like the pale pink naturally occurring *Lobelia* seedling that I mentioned above. However, I doubt whether any hybrid *Lobelia* plant is going to be as good at attracting hummingbirds as just plain *L. cardinalis*. I don't find seed so readily produced on these named selections.

A recent author mentioned buying great quantities of sugar to feed what she referred to as the "hummingpigs" (G. Roth, *Lost and Found: Unexpected Revelations about Food and Money*, Viking, 2011). I like that expression! But I think that it is far easier to grow cardinal flowers to attract hummingpigs. You can find plants at many nurseries or you can acquire seed from the HPS Seed Exchange or commercial sources.

Lobelia cardinalis grows easily from seed. You can readily collect large quantities of seed from cardinal flower plants. Check for the round seedpods to be dry, and check that a pod is ready to release a number of small seeds. (Seedpods at the bottom of the stalk might be mature when flower buds at the top are just



Mix of lobelia plants in bed beyond lawn. On the left and center are wild-type *Lobelia cardinalis* (bright red flowers). Three flower spikes in the center are very light pink, almost white. This is a seedling that planted itself. On the right are 3 or 4 stalks of *Lobelia 'Monet Moment'* which has bright pink flowers.

opening). I shake the seed stalks over a white paper. Then I break open individual pods if I want even more seed. No cold period is required, so you can start seed at any time indoors under lights or in indirect light or in a greenhouse, using any germination mix or even a growing mix. Avoid mixes with large pieces of bark or moisture-retention gels at this stage. Moisten the mix until it holds together easily. Sow the seed sparsely, and do not cover with the mix. (It needs light to germinate). Mist with water. Store in a Ziploc® bag and mist as needed until germination occurs. Or use a prepared food container with some holes drilled in the bottom and a translucent top as your moisture-retentive planting container. When

the plants have healthy true leaves, transplant to individual or community pots. Seed is viable for several years, just keep it refrigerated.

It is no secret that hummingbirds like cardinal flower. I am amazed that I see so few cardinal flowers growing in gardens where both the plants and the birds would be appreciated. My goal is to help remedy that, so, for your viewing pleasure, plant LOTS of cardinal flower!



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