

Wildflower in Focus

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Cardinal Flower

Lobelia cardinalis L.

Bellflower or Bluebell Family (*Campanulaceae*)

[Some taxonomists place this genus in a separate family — the Lobelia Family (*Lobeliaceae*)]



Lobelia cardinalis Cardinal flower

The cardinal flower is one of the most striking wildflowers of Maryland's native flora. The bright red blooms of the cardinal flower attract ruby-

throated hummingbirds. Their vivid color is the traditional color of the robes worn by Roman Catholic Cardinals - and thus the name. Their hue is also similar to the color of the native male bird that shares the name cardinal. Growing in wet meadows, springs, freshwater marshes, and along streams, rivers, and ponds throughout the state, the cardinal flower is one of several members of the *Lobelia* genus native to Maryland and the only one with red flowers. Other *Lobelias* growing here have flowers ranging from blue to whitish-blue, lilac, and rarely white. The cardinal flower blooms during the verdant days of mid to late summer and stays in bloom as autumn stirs.

Specific Characteristics of the Cardinal Flower

Flowers: Scarlet, irregular, 2-lipped, with a 2-lobed upper lip, a 3-lobed lower one and a tubular base. Sexual parts protrude in a beak-like fashion (see illustration). Flowers 1-2" long and wide in upright racemes. Five sepals are thin (almost hair-like).

Leaves: Alternate, simple, lanceolate to oblong or narrowly ovate, tapered to apex and base, pubescent or glabrous. Toothed, often irregularly so (sometimes dentate). Short-petioled to sessile, 2-7" long.

Height and Growth Habit: 1-5'; usually unbranched.

Range: New Brunswick to Minnesota, south to the Gulf of Mexico.

Herbal Lore: American Indians used the roots and leaves of this plant for a number of conditions, including syphilis, typhoid, fevers, headaches and rheumatism. In Peterson Field Guides'

Eastern/Central Medicinal Plants, Steven Foster and James A. Duke report that cardinal flower's root tea was considered both a worm expellant and a love potion! The plant is potentially toxic. Please remember that this wildflower and all native plants growing in their natural habitats should not be disturbed.

Blooming Time: July - September.

Locations: The Potomac River and C&O Canal; Hughes Hollow in the McKee-Beshers Wildlife Management Area; Little Bennett Regional Park; trails and roadsides around the base of Sugarloaf Mountain; Jug Bay Wetlands Sanctuary; and moist and wet habitats throughout Maryland. See **Finding Wildflowers in the Washington-Baltimore Area** by Fleming, Lobstein and Tufty for additional locations near the cities.

Similar Species: Bee-balm or Oswego-tea (*Monarda didyma*) bears scarlet flowers in dense roundish terminal heads and its leaves are **opposite**. See Brown and Brown's **Herbaceous Plants of Maryland** for illustrated descriptions of other *Lobelia* genus members.

"Wildflower in Focus" text adapted from **An Illustrated Guide to Eastern Woodland Wildflowers and Trees: 350 Plants Observed at Sugarloaf Mountain, Maryland** (Choukas-Bradley and Brown, University of Virginia Press).