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## PLANT FACT SHEET

### Cardinal Flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*) Fact sheet



The Cardinal Flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*) is a perennial herbaceous plant that grows between 2-4 feet tall. It is commonly found in wet places, stream banks, and swamps. It was introduced to Europe in the mid 1620s, where the name Cardinal flower was in use by 1629, likely due to the similarity of the flower's color to the miters of Roman Catholic Cardinals.

*Lobelia cardinalis* is related to two other *Lobelia* species in the Eastern United States, *Lobelia inflata* (Indian Tobacco) and *Lobelia siphilitica* (Great Lobelia); all display the characteristic "lip" petal near the opening of the flower and the "milky" liquid the plant excretes. It has been known to cause an upset in the digestive system when consumed.

The main stem is ridged and somewhat hairy. The leaves are up to 6" long and 1½" broad. The alternate leaves are toothed and oblong to lance-

shaped and pointed at both ends. The flowers are usually vibrant (fire engine) red, deeply five-lobed, up to 1½" across and are produced in an erect raceme up to 27" tall during the summer to fall.

The anthers are at the end of a slender red filament tube extending out over the lower lip of the corolla. The corolla has a slit on each side near the base. The seeds come in a two-celled, many-seeded capsules opening at the top. They are small, less than 1mm. and numerous.

Dividing and spreading out the young plants that form around the older mature plants each year easily propagate this plant. Although the plant is generally considered a perennial any one plant may only live 7 to 10 years and then die. To insure that your whole collection of cardinal flowers do not die off at the same time be sure to propagate some new plant lines using seeds at least every 4 years.

The Cardinal Flower is a must if you want to attract hummingbirds although browsing deer often damages young plants.

The Iroquois had many medicinal uses for cardinal flower. The root was boiled together with the root of *Cichorium intybus* and the liquid was used to treat fever sores. The mashed root, stems, leaves and blossoms were made into a decoction and drank for cramps. The plant was also used as an emetic for an upset stomach from eating something bad. The plant was added to other medicines to give them more strength. The Delaware used an infusion of the roots to treat typhoid. The Meskwaki used this plant as a ceremonial tobacco, throwing it to the winds to ward off a storm. The Pawnee used the roots and flowers of cardinal flower in the composition of a love charm.

Cardinal flowers are relatively easy to grow. Capsules should be collected in autumn, usually October. Cut the stalks below the capsules and place them upside down in a paper sack. Ensure

the bag is left open for a few days so that the capsules are exposed to the air. Shake the bag to release the seeds. Crushing the capsules with a rolling pin and picking out the seeds from the litter can retrieve the capsules that have remaining seeds. The seeds can then be planted right away.

Cardinal Flower seeds will germinate without cold stratification, but they need light, so sow the seeds in a flat with a damp fine grade peat light mix. Keep the flats moist and under lights or in a greenhouse. They should green up in a few weeks. Transplant them in 4-6 weeks into individual pots such as 70cell plug trays, use the same potting mix and keep fertilizing. The seedlings are tiny at first, so fertilize them every other week with a liquid fertilizer. After another 4 weeks they can be put out in the garden or transplanted into larger pots of 4 to 6 inch diameter. Plant the plants in an outdoor spot that is in full sun or very light shade and never dries completely. Space the plants 8 to 12" apart. Add plenty of peat moss when planting and mulch well to keep the soil cool and moist. Protect the plants from deer. Cardinal flower

will take two years to bloom, forming a large rosette the first year. Allow the plants to self-sow. They are heavy feeders, so compost or a shot of granular fertilizer when they begin growth is recommended.

To propagate by cutting take two node stem cuttings (4-6 inches) before the flowers open and remove the lower leaf and half the upper leaf. Treat the cutting with hormodin 2 or rootone and place the cuttings in a sand and perlite medium, cover lightly, water, and remember to keep the medium moist. Roots will form in 2-3 weeks, but the cuttings need to force a good new crown from the lower node to successfully over-winter.

When well established, clumps of this plant can be divided in the fall or spring by separating the rosettes or basal offshoots from the mother plant and replanting these divisions and watering them immediately. In the winter, keep the leafy offshoots at the base of the drying stems of old plants free of leaf litter to allow them full exposure to the air and sunshine.

#### Seed Available in the Following Quantities

Packet	Ounce	Pound	50# Bag	Wholesale	Retail
\$2.00 + SH	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

**Call Freddie Lorenz for a quote — Toll free 1 800 826 3655**