

## ... Other Information

Native Americans used infusions from different parts of the plant to treat a variety of ailments and even as a wash for poison-ivy. When pulverized, the seeds, a commodity of intertribal commerce, were rubbed on the hands by men as a love charm and also used in some tribes as a man's perfume.

**AQUILEGIA  
CANADENSIS L.**



## ... Where to See *A. canadensis*

Wild columbine is a plant of wooded or open, rocky or sandy ground, dry slopes, exposed rock ledges and crevices, and even peat bogs. Typically blooming in April and May or, at higher elevations, in June, it may continue to produce flowers well into July. It occurs throughout Virginia, with the exception of the Eastern Shore and several southern counties. Its native range is from Quebec to Saskatchewan south to Florida and Texas.

To see and learn more about interesting species of plants native to Virginia, visit our Website (<http://www.hort.vt.edu/vnps/>) and contact your local chapter of VNPS for the times and dates of programs and wildflower walks in your area.

Text by Stanwyn G. Shetler • Illustration by Nicky Staunton  
• Color photo by VNPS photo contest winner Carolyn C. Bates •

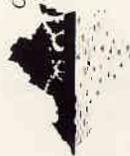
Gardeners should be certain that wild columbine and other native plants purchased for home gardens are nursery-propagated, not wild-collected. For a list of retail sources of nursery-propagated plants and responsibly collected seed, send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to:

Virginia Native Plant Society  
P.O. Box 844  
Annandale, VA 22003

Virginia Native Plant Society

Conserving Wild Flowers and Wild Places

P.O. Box 844  
Annandale, VA 22003



Wild Columbine

*Aquilegia canadensis*

1998 Virginia Wildflower of the Year

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# Wild Columbine

Few spring wildflowers possess such poetic beauty or evoke such sentiment as wild columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*). Its flowers, as one writer puts it, have airy grace and ornamental poise, dancing, as another says, in red and yellow petticoats to the rhythm of the breeze along rock ledges. It ranks high in Virginia's treasury of native wildflowers.

Other common names are Canada or Canadian columbine, honeysuckle, meetinghouses, rock-bells, and, simply, columbine. *Aquilegia* is a Latin word of uncertain origin; probably, it was derived from *aquilegus*, meaning "water collector," in allusion to the fluid at the base of the petal's spur, but perhaps from *aquila*, an eagle, because the spurs suggested the talons of an eagle to Linnaeus. "Columbine" comes from the Latin for dove (*columba*), the spurred petals perhaps having suggested a ring of doves around a fountain.

*Aquilegia* is a genus of the buttercup family, Ranunculaceae, comprising worldwide about 60 genera and 2,500 species. A family of mostly herbaceous perennials, it is centered in the cooler North Temperate regions. It is important for its many ornamentals, including anemones, buttercups, clematises, columbines, globe-flowers, hellebores, larkspurs, and peonies.

A circumboreal group of about 70 species, the genus is represented in North America by 20 native species. Many Eurasian species and hybrids are cultivated in North America, but only the European *A. vulgaris* escapes sometimes from cultivation and naturalizes here. Columbines are highly variable and hybridize freely in nature as well as in the garden. Wild columbine is the only species native to eastern North America and the only species in Virginia, native or naturalized.

## .....In the Wild

Wild columbine is a delicate but hardy perennial herb with thin, woody rhizomes and slender, much-branched stems. The plants typically grow 1-2 feet tall, but may reach 3 feet or more. The delicate leaves are both basal and alternate on the stem and 1-3 times compound, with each division in threes. The small leaflets, in threes, are more or less oval with rounded teeth or lobes.

The showy, spurred flowers, nodding at the tips of slender branches with the spurs pointing upward, are 1-2 inches long and bright red to pinkish with yellow insides. The flower consists of five tubular, red petals with yellow lips alternating with five flat, reddish sepals; numerous yellow stamens, projecting downward like a golden tassel well beyond the petals and sepals; and five green pistils with long thin styles, surrounded by the stamens. The distinctive petals, which look like tiny cornucopias, extend backward into long hollow spurs ending in nectar-filled knobs. The five, erect, long-beaked, pistils mature into dry follicles, which

split along the inner side to shed their numerous, shiny black seeds.

The flower is adapted to long-tongued nectar-feeders, notably hawk moths and hummingbirds. The association between wild columbine and the ruby-throated hummingbird, which is attracted to red flowers, is well known. The hummingbird is a predictable regular at columbine colonies.

Nectar-feeding visitors and bees visiting for the pollen are the agents of cross-pollination. The flower is adapted to prevent self-pollination. The stamens mature first, starting from the outside ring and moving toward the center, shedding all their pollen before the styles emerge at the mouth of the flower and spread their feathery stigmas to receive pollen. Even if the male and female phases overlap briefly, pollen cannot fall upward from the longer stamens onto the shorter styles in the hanging flowers.

## .....In the Garden

Wild columbine is an old-fashioned garden plant, cultivated in Europe and America since the mid-1600s. It's easy to grow from seeds or from divisions of rootstocks in the spring. It prefers a moist, well-drained, slightly acid, sandy loam with organic matter, but will grow in a wide range of soils, including clays, especially if they drain well and have organic matter added.

Columbine does best in light shade, but will tolerate full sun if daytime temperatures are not too hot. Sow seeds from spring to early summer or in flats during winter for trans-

planting outdoors in spring. Newly ripened seeds will germinate without treatment if sown outdoors in seedbeds or flats. Nursery stock should be set out in the spring or in the fall when dormant. Seedlings do not flower the first season.

Although in nature individual plants may persist for years, under garden conditions individuals may last only a few years. Wild columbine readily seeds itself, however, and new plants spread rapidly. Several cultivars are available in the nursery trade.