

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #22 Answer: GREAT BLUE LOBELIA (*Lobelia syphilitica*)

The name *Lobelia* honors a 16th century Flemish botanist, Matthias de l'Obel, the personal physician to King James I. He devised a plant classification system using characteristics of leaves a century ahead of Linnaeus, whose system which we use today was based on reproductive structures.

Syphilis was then rampant in Europe, and there were high hopes of a finding a cure in New World flora. Alas, the only effect of *L. syphilitica* was to poison the patient, but the name stuck anyhow.

Blue lobelia grows best in damp places, so you will find it beside ponds, along streams or marshes, in seeps and in wet meadows.

Its blue corolla tube opens into two lips, the upper with two lobes and the lower with three. Deeply slit, the lobes grant easy access to pollinators a bumblebees and other bees. They also attract pirate bugs, parasitic wasps, soldier beetles, and ladybird beetles, who prey on other insects that eat plants.

The plants are gyno-dioecious a there are plants with female flowers, and plants with perfect flowers. After it goes to seed, the plant dies, but offsets from the roots form new rosettes. Full of toxic alkaloids, the rosettes stay safe from browsing all winter long.

WILDFLOWER #23

Clues: This often overlooked charmer in the Mint family has squarish heads of densely packed purple flowers.

