

---

## Wildflower Spot – October 2020

### John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

---

# GREAT BLUE LOBELIA

## *Lobelia siphilitica*

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

A lovely plant late in the growing season, when plants with yellow flowers are usually prominent. Tall spikes of brilliant true-blue flowers grow on a stiff, unbranched, leafy stalk, 1-3 feet high. Flowers of this genus all have 2 narrow lobes or “ears” above, with 3 wider lobes forming a lip below. The 1-inch long violet-blue flowers of Great Blue Lobelia are striped with white on the 3 lower lobes, which appear more prominent than the lobes above. Leaves are alternate on the stem, finely toothed and pointed.

Great Blue Lobelia is a wetland native species, requiring wet to moist soil, fertile and loamy. The plant requires little maintenance, growing in part shade, but in full sun the soil must be consistently moist, as in rain gardens. The natural habitat is meadows, moist thickets and swamps from Maine to Manitoba and Colorado, south to North Carolina and Texas. While found in most counties of Virginia, it is infrequent in the Coastal Plain.

This clump-forming perennial has a long blooming period, from July through October. Also known as Blue Cardinal Flower, this plant tolerates conditions that are drier than those of the red species. This plant is a member of the Bellflower Family, the name suggesting a rounded corolla with a long neck. Bumblebees can access the nectar at the bottom of the tube-shaped flower while collecting pollen.

While the seeds are too small to be of use to wildlife, Great Blue Lobelia self-seeds and is easy to grow from seeds collected in the fall. Or by division -- the roots make offshoots that can be separated from the main plant in fall or spring. Making cuttings from stems with two nodes is another method of growing more of these plants.

Other Lobelia species native to the Coastal Plain have much smaller flowers. Indian Tobacco *L. inflata* has been reported in every county of Virginia, growing in woodlands, roadsides, fields and wetlands. Nuttall’s Lobelia *L. nuttallii* is frequent in wet areas and roadsides. Downy Lobelia *L. puberula* is in every county other than those in the far northwestern area. Other species and cultivars are available in the nursery trade.

Early medical writers thought American Indians used the root primarily to treat syphilis, hence the species name *siphilitica*. While potentially poisonous, the American Indians used root tea for syphilis, and leaf tea for a number of illnesses, such as colds, worms, nosebleeds, coughs and headaches. ❖



Great Blue Lobelia



Indian Tobacco

---

**Photo:** Great Blue Lobelia (*Lobelia siphilitica*) taken by Helen Hamilton  
For more information about native plants visit [www.vnps.org](http://www.vnps.org).

# DOWNY LOBELIA: AN OVERLOOKED GARDEN NATIVE

By Betsy Washington

Several of our native Lobelias are well loved and absolutely beautiful. Cardinal Flower with its brilliant red flower spikes, and Great Blue Lobelia with its crowded spires of deep blue flowers, are familiar to many gardeners. Downy Lobelia (*Lobelia puberula*), which is less well-known, graces roadside ditches, low and upland woods, riverbanks and other boggy or damp areas. In fact, Downy Lobelia is the most common blue Lobelia on the coastal plain and throughout the Southeast U.S. All three of these Lobelias are wonderful garden additions that attract numerous pollinators to their tubular flowers, including many showy butterflies and hummingbirds.

As you might expect, the stems and leaves of Downy Lobelia are covered in soft, short downy hairs. Its spires of soft lavender to blue flowers atop 3 – 5' tall stems are less crowded than those of its Great Blue "cousin," giving Downy Lobelia the elegant, "refined" look of some lavender bellflowers so admired in English gardens. Each flower has two flaring lips, of which the upper has two lobes and the lower lip has three, with a single white spot at its base. Downy Lobelia blooms from late July into November, but typically peaks in late August to early October.

An overlooked garden plant that is much tougher than it looks, Downy Lobelia prefers consistently moist soils but tolerates those that are occasionally wet and even dry soils. It is easy to grow in sun or part shade, and is at home in a soils ranging from our



A Painted Lady butterfly pollinates the blossoms of a Downy Lobelia (*Lobelia puberula*). Photo by Betsy Washington

frequently sandy, to loam and clay.

Like other Lobelias, Downy Lobelia is often considered a short-lived perennial, but produces lots of tiny seeds that will keep the population "blossoming" if the ground is not mulched heavily. Gently raking around the base of the plant each fall will encourage new seedlings. Downy Lobelia is even deer resistant.

Often it is found in the wild growing with Joe-pye-weeds, Mistflower, and Goldenrods. Planting them together will create a stunning late summer-fall vignette. For even more stunning colors, add Cardinal Flower and Great Blue Lobelia.

---

*Editor's Note: This article first appeared as the Plant of the Month for August 2019 on the blog of the Northern Neck Chapter of VPNS.*

---