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Technical Report

Wetland Flora



No. 99-1 / January 1999

Gene Silberhorn

Cardinal Flower

Lobelia cardinalis L.

Growth Habit and Diagnostic Characteristics

Cardinal flower is one of the most striking perennial herbs found in freshwater wetlands because of its bright scarlet petals. All other *Lobelias* have either blue, lavender or white flowers. Cardinal flower is also the tallest species within the genus, standing up to 7 feet, but usually ranging from 2.5 to 5 feet. The individual flowers are arranged in a rather tight terminal raceme, with the more mature flowers at the lower part of the inflorescence. Leaves are simple, alternate with irregular serrated margins. Colonies of this species stand out among the diverse species often found in wetlands because of the bright flowers and tall stature. Although the plant is perennial, it does not produce tubers or rhizomes, but sends out basal offshoots. The blooming period usually begins in July and often lasts until early October. The colorful flowers develop into green, spherical/oval capsules that turn brown and release tiny brownish/yellow seeds in late autumn or early winter.

Distribution

Lobelia cardinalis can be found in wetlands throughout Virginia and much of eastern United States.

Habitat

Cardinal flower is commonly found in freshwater wetlands such as marshes, swamps, bogs, along streams and ditches. It is seldom abundant in the Mid-Atlantic region, but can become very abundant farther south, to the point of choking waterways. Plants appear to be more robust in open marshes.

Ecological Value/Benefits

The brilliant scarlet flower of this tall herb is its greatest value. Hummingbirds are attracted to this plant.

Wetland Indicator Status

According to the *Draft Revision of the National List of Plant Species that Occur in Wetlands, 1997*, *Lobelia cardinalis* is classified as an **facultative wetland plant (FACW+)**. FACW plants "usually occur in wetlands (estimated probability 67-99%)."

Lobelia cardinalis L.



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