

Two Fall-Blooming Native Perennials

By Susan Camp

Every year the Gloucester Extension Master Gardeners hold a big plant sale, usually during the second weekend of September. This year, our Plant Extravaganza will occur on Friday, September 8th and Saturday, September 9th. We will feature a large selection of perennials, native and introduced (but not invasive), shrubs, small ornamental trees, house plants, herbs, and gently used gardening tools, books, and other items, all sold at reasonable prices. Our earnings allow us to present two \$1000 scholarships annually to Gloucester High School seniors and \$500 for five \$100 4-H scholarships.

Recently, someone asked me, “Why do you hold the Plant Extravaganza in the fall? The answer is really twofold. First, fall is a good time for our plant sale because most sales in our region occur in the spring, which means we have less competition. The more important reason though, is that perennial flowers, shrubs, and trees planted in the fall have a better chance of sending down strong roots during the winter months when the leaves and flowers are dormant. By spring, fall plants will be ready to leaf out and bloom, and more likely to survive the hot summer weather than those planted in the spring.

As Virginians have become more aware of the problems caused by invasive exotic plants like English ivy, nandina, and Tree-of-Heaven, we have turned to planting native species that will provide food and habitat for bees, butterflies, birds, small mammals, and other species.

At last year’s Plant Extravaganza, we discovered that native perennials and shrubs like the lovely American beautyberry (*Callicarpa americana*) sold out very quickly. This year, we decided to find a way to provide more and varied native plants to sell. Master Gardener Debbie Rollins developed a plan to purchase inexpensive native perennial plugs that Master Gardeners could nurture and raise over the summer. By September, they will be healthy, full-size plants.

One Eastern/Southeastern native I am going to plant this year for the first time is New York ironweed (*Vernonia noveboracensis*), a tall (3 to 8 feet), upright, clump-forming perennial with coarse, stiff stems and rough, lance-shaped leaves. It has a mature spread of 3 to 4 feet. Clusters of fluffy, deep purple flowers bloom from mid-summer to fall, eventually taking on a rusty tinge as they fade.

New York ironwood requires little maintenance. It prefers rich, moist, acidic soil in full sun, but will tolerate clay and other soil types. To reduce the summer height of ironwood, cut back the stems in spring. Deadhead flowers to decrease self-seeding. This perennial attracts butterflies and various specialized bees; songbirds eat the seeds. High deer resistance is reported. No serious diseases or insect pests are reported.

Blue cardinal flower (*Lobelia siphilitica*) is an Eastern North America native with a mature height of 3 to 4 feet and a spread of 1 to 1 ½ feet. Blue cardinal flower, also called blue lobelia, is a clump-forming perennial that grows easily in rich, moist, humusy soil. Farther north, blue cardinal flower can grow in full sun, but requires part shade in our climate. This pretty plant grows naturally along stream banks, and in meadows and swampy areas.

The two-lipped, light to dark blue flowers arise from an unbranched stalk to form dense terminal racemes. The light green leaves are lance-shaped with fine serrations. Blue lobelia blooms from July to October and attracts hummingbirds, butterflies, and other pollinators. Some deer resistance is reported. No serious diseases or insect pests are reported, although slugs and snails may damage the leaves.

L. siphilitica was used in the past to treat sexually transmitted diseases. All plant parts contain toxic alkaloids and a volatile oil and should not be ingested. Symptoms of poisoning include gastrointestinal distress, convulsions, and coma. The plant does not cause contact dermatitis.

See entries in the Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Finder and the North Carolina State Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox for photos and information on these interesting and attractive native perennials.

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