CARDINAL FLOWER

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Illustrated by Lucile Walton

In the southwestern part of the state, near Mountain Lake, the Appalachian Trail crosses a little stream called John’s Creek which eventually runs out into the James River. At that crossing, almost underneath the bridge, there is a small stand of cardinal flowers. I think they may have been the first ones I ever saw. While admiring them, I remember feeling that this must be one of the reddest sights that woods could offer.

Lobelias are sometimes accorded family status, but they are more often included as a subfamily of the Campanulaceae or Bellflowers. The campanulas themselves have regular petals; in the lobelias the corolla is irregular. Lobelia flowers are bilaterally symmetrical with upper and lower lips. The upper lip is split into two thin, pointed lobes. The lower lip has three somewhat wider lobes. A characteristic and unusual feature of the lobelias is that the anthers (always) and the filaments (nearly always) are united into a tube. This tube is quite a bit longer than the petals and sticks out through the split in the upper lip. The tube has a tuft of little hairs or “beard” at the tip.

In Lobelia cardinalis, the cardinal flower, the petals are a brilliant, dark red. The beard at the end of the stamen-tube is glistening white. The corolla is nearly two inches long. The lower three lobes are lanceolate and sharp, the upper two are nearly as long, wider at the tips and spread out horizontally. The whole plant of the cardinal flower is stout and erect and may grow to four feet in height. The flowers are borne on long spikes. Leaves are alternate, rather thin and lance-shaped with toothed edges.

There is a milky juice in lobelia flowers which is more or less poisonous and has various medical applications. A preparation of Lobelia siphilitica, the Great Blue Cardinal Flower, was supposed to cure syphilis; hence, the specific name of the flower. Tincture of lobelia comes from Lobelia inflata or Indian tobacco. It is a volatile alkaloid which smells of nicotine and has an acid, burning taste. It can be administered in cases of asthma and chronic bronchitis but must be used with circumspection since it can also be fatal. In the eighteenth century there was a self-appointed New England doctor called Samuel Thompson who prescribed it for everything. Probably some of his patients did get better, but since he had no formal medical training and was twice indicted for murder during his life, I think his medical judgment must have been rather limited.

The name lobelia comes from another doctor of an earlier period. Matthias de l’Obel was a seventeenth century Flemish herbalist who was, at some stage of his career, physician to James I of England. “Cardinalis,” of course, refers to the color of the flower which is reminiscent of a cardinal’s robe.

The cardinal flower likes wet soil and grows along streams, in swamps and in wet woods from Quebec to Minnesota, south to Florida and Texas and west to Colorado and Kansas. There are two other color forms known, one with pink and one with white flowers. The blooms are out from July to September. Cardinal flowers are said to be quite easy to transplant. They are not too fussy about conditions, although fairly rich, slightly acid soil is the best, and they must be in a damp situation.

Cardinal flowers are some of the favorite plants of hummingbirds. A hummingbird’s eye is particularly sensitive to the red end of the color spectrum, and the birds are attracted mainly to flowers which are red or orange; for example, trumpet-vine, jewel weed and so on. This contrasts with bees where the eye is especially sensitive to the other end of the spectrum, including ultra-violet. Most of the flowers commonly visited by bees are blue or purple.

I think the hummingbird shows very sound judgment. It is easy to sympathize with his preference for such handsome, showy members of Virginia’s high summer scene.