

Perennials Are Springing Up!

By Susan Camp

We didn't have a terrible winter of heavy snow and freezing temperatures, but then, we rarely do. We had enough winter, though, of cold, dark days, high winds, and heavy rain. The days are warming up, and the forsythia and daffodils are blooming. Tiny leaf buds are forming on the branches of trees and shrubs, and little green sprouts are poking their heads up out of the soil.

Tuesday, March 19 was the Spring Equinox, and one of my favorite times of year. I spent a few hours last Friday walking around the front garden and the various beds to see which perennials and shrubs made it through the winter. So far, things look good.

Yesterday, I discovered that the five blue lobelia (*Lobelia siphilitica*) plants that I purchased last September at the Gloucester Master Gardeners Plant Extravaganza survived the winter and are about 2 inches tall. Also called blue cardinal flower or great blue lobelia, this attractive eastern North America herbaceous perennial is a member of the Campanulaceae or bellflower family. It reaches 1½ to 4 feet in height. The showy, tubular, bright blue flowers bloom from mid-summer into fall at the upper ends of stiff, unbranched stems. The lance-shaped, light green leaves are finely serrated. The flowers attract hummingbirds, butterflies, and bees.

Blue lobelia prefers moist or occasionally wet soil rich in organic matter in full sun to deep shade. In July and August, light shade is necessary to prevent leaves from turning brown; blue lobelia is not drought tolerant and will need frequent watering to prevent leaf edges from browning. This plant is a good addition to a pollinator or rain garden. Snails and slugs are occasional pests.

All parts of blue lobelia are toxic if eaten, causing gastrointestinal and neurological symptoms. *L. siphilitica*, as its name implies, was used in the past as a treatment for syphilis. The plant also has been employed to treat asthma and other respiratory conditions.

I also purchased five plugs of wild bergamot or bee balm (*Monarda fistulosa*) at the last Plant Extravaganza. They are still in pots, but all five are showing tiny green leaves and will soon find a new home in one of the front garden borders.

Wild bergamot is an herbaceous perennial in the Lamiaceae or mint family. It is a North American native that prefers the dry soils of prairies, meadows, and roadsides in full sun. Like most mint family members, wild bergamot has square stems and exudes an aromatic fragrance when the oblong, green or silvery-gray leaves are rubbed. The leaves are edible.

Wild bergamot grows to a height of 2 to 4 feet with a similar width. The two-lipped, tubular pink, lavender, or purple flowers bloom on a globular head and are surrounded by feathery, pink bracts. The flowers are a magnet for bees, butterflies, and hummingbirds.

Like other *Monarda* species, wild bergamot is susceptible to powdery mildew. It is deer and rabbit resistant. *M. fistulosa* has a long history of medicinal use by Native Americans.

I also purchase a pot of eastern North America native columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*), a member of the Ranunculaceae or buttercup family. *A. canadensis* bears yellow petals with pink to blood-red sepals that trail the red spurs characteristic of the plant. The delicate, lacy, blue-green leaves resemble the foliage of rue.

A. canadensis can reach a height of 2 to 3 feet with a spread of 1 to 2 feet, although the height is often much lower. Columbine requires organically rich, moist, well-drained soil in full sun to part shade. Columbine self-seeds prolifically. The plant will die back to the ground in winter, but will return each spring. Columbine provides nectar for bumblebees, butterflies, and hummingbirds.

Find entries on these and other perennials in the NCSU Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox.