

# COLUMBINES IN FLORIDA

## Uncharted Territory

by Frederick B. Essig

I have an obsession with growing things that aren't supposed to grow in Florida. Strictly speaking, of course, the only plants that are supposed to grow here are our native plants. Everything else, including citrus trees and strawberries, was brought here by someone who wasn't sure if it would do well in our soil and climate. That's the challenge that I find exciting. Some plants brought into the state, though, have turned out to be horrible weeds, so common sense and caution must be used when introducing new plants.

Columbines are a favorite garden flower almost everywhere but Florida. They belong to the genus *Aquilegia*, in the buttercup family *Ranunculaceae*. Best de-

scribed as "crown-like," each flower has 5 nectar spurs projecting in a ring from its back. They remind me of colorful court jesters; some have likened them to ballerinas, as they are often produced on long, delicate stalks, and seem to dance in the breeze. The name columbine, "little dove," comes from a very popular female theatrical character in 16<sup>th</sup> century Italy.

I became fascinated by these delicate jewels at the age of 12, while undertaking my first wildflower project at a summer camp in the San Bernardino Mountains of California. The western red columbine is common there in moist areas along streams. Columbines, of which there are some 70 species, are found in similar habitats throughout the northern hemisphere. My first stab at growing columbines ('McKana Giant' hybrids) was in Riverside, California, not exactly a cool place in the summer. But they grew well during the winter and bloomed in the spring. Twenty years later I began asking myself, "Why not in Florida?"

Actually, our winters are perfect for growing many of the plants that are grown during the summer up north. These include



photo by Frederick B. Essig

*Like beautiful ballerinas, columbines grow on long, delicate stalks and dance in the breeze.*

strawberries; a great variety of annual flowers, such as petunias, pansies, and snapdragons; and vegetable crops like lettuce and carrots. The problem with columbines is that they are perennials. Most northern perennials are quickly killed by our summer heat, humidity, and bugs, and



photo by Frederick B. Essig

*A beautiful blue cultivar, most likely from *Aquilegia vulgaris*.*



photo by Frederick B. Essig

**Aquilegia formosa* is at home in the mountains of the Pacific states.*



may not bloom during our short winter days. Growing them from seed is generally ineffective because most do not mature before the hot summer sets in, and importing them as blooming-size plants for a brief display of flowers is just not worth it (unless you're DisneyWorld).

A little research, however, revealed that - surprise! - there is a species of columbine native to Florida. It comes from a little area way up north near the town of Marianna. *Aquilegia canadensis*, the eastern red columbine, grows all the way up into Canada. The Florida population is considered to be a distinct subspecies, *A. canadensis* subspecies *australis*. Now I had the perfect opportunity to try growing some columbines that might actually work here (and without upsetting my Native Plant Society friends).

The next April, I packed my family into the car and went columbine hunting. At Florida Caverns State Park near Marianna, west of Tallahassee, we found them by the thousands growing on a limestone outcrop, along with trilliums and other southern stragglers of the Appalachian flora. Beneath this natural columbine garden were the famous Florida Caverns, which gave the kids something to do. (They don't share my passion for wildflower hunting and have nearly mutinied several times on family vacations!)

Later, I obtained some seed of the Florida columbine through Native Plant Society channels, and had no trouble germinating them and getting healthy plants. After putting them in the ground, they actually bloomed the next spring, but many of them died

afterwards. Remembering that they grew on a limestone outcrop, I planted some more with a healthy dose of lime mixed into the soil and a mulch of shell rock. Those plants survived for several years, and sent up flowers each spring. There were even some volunteers that came up from seed.

When I decided to try some exotic species, I got seeds of my old friends, 'McKana Giant' hybrids, and obtained other species from specialty seed dealers. You can find many of these dealers on the Internet, along with non-



photo by Frederick B. Essig

*The blooms of this Florida native are hummingbird-accessible.*

profit organizations such as the North American Rock Garden Society. Members of NARGS can choose from hundreds of unusual species in the annual seed exchange.

Most of these species germinated within a few weeks (some never did, of course), and bloomed a few months later, essentially behaving as annuals. All of the species pictured here, and many more, were grown in Tampa. Germinating the seeds is

not difficult, but the requirements vary somewhat from species to species. Seeds from the larger commercial seed companies come with good directions.

Seeds of all species germinate and grow better when it is relatively cool, and they need light for germination. They should be pressed lightly into the soil, or covered very thinly with a layer of fine peat or peat moss, and then kept continually moist. Placing the pots in a ziplock storage bag will help keep them moist. The cooler days of late fall are perfect for germinating most species, and certainly for all the commercially available varieties. But to get a jump on the process and leave time for blooming before it gets too hot, they can be planted indoors where temperatures are kept in the mid-70's and there is plenty of light. Extreme cases benefit from refrigeration, or covering the surface of the soil where the seeds are planted with a layer of crushed ice once a day.

My limited experience proves that columbines can be grown as winter annuals in Florida. I tried keeping some alive, as dormant root crowns, in the refrigerator during the summer, but it was more trouble than it was worth. Some of them made it, but it was a constant battle with fungal rot. It is far easier to grow them from seed each year.

Take the plunge into uncharted territory. See if columbines work for you.

---

*Fred Essig is an Associate Professor of Biology at USF in Tampa. In past issues of **Florida Gardening**, he's led us into the uncharted territories of growing clematis and calla lilies in Florida.*