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COLUMBINE (*Aquilegia species*)

Columbine, also known as Granny's Bonnet or European Crowfoot, is a hardy perennial. Species of columbine are native to North America, Europe, and Asia and some date to at least the mid-1500s. The plants grow in clumps and are noted for spring blooms in a range of colors from blue and violet to white, pink, and red. Columbine is a short-lived perennial normally surviving 3–4 years. They are prolific seed producers and will self-seed if allowed. Columbine makes a lovely cut flower, is excellent in borders, and is a beautiful addition to pollinator gardens, wildflower meadows, and shade gardens. It is relatively easy to grow but it is susceptible to leaf miners which can cause irregular serpentine patterns on the leaves that diminish the quality of columbine as a cut flower.

SOIL REQUIREMENTS & SITE SELECTION

Columbine prefers humus-rich, well-drained soil of a pH 6–8. It prefers partial shade, but it will tolerate full sun where summers are cool, and plants can be kept well-watered. It does not like water-logged, poorly drained conditions.

TEMPERATURE

Columbine is perennial in zones 3–9. Note that plants must go through vernalization (a sustained period of cold) before they bloom; therefore, plants sown from seeds in the spring will not bloom until the following spring. You can also choose to seed in the fall for blooms the following spring.

CULTURE

Columbine can be transplanted or direct seeded, but transplanting is recommended. It will germinate best if the seed is first chilled; place the seed in a ziplock bag or sealed container in the refrigerator for 5 days prior to planting.

If transplanting, seed indoors 8–10 weeks before the last frost. Barely cover the seed, as light aids in germination. Keep the growing medium at 70-75°F (21-24°C)—temperatures that are too high can result in poor germination. Keep seeds moist until plants emerge. Transplant into larger containers or cell packs when first true leaves appear. Transplant

CAUTION: columbine is poisonous. Exercise extreme caution around children and pets. The purchaser assumes all liability relating to the use of this product.



'Pink Petticoat' columbine in trials at Johnny's research farm in Albion, Maine.

into the field after the last frost. Space plants 10–15" apart.

If direct seeding, sow once the soil has warmed to 65°F (18°C). Sow directly into the seed bed in clusters of 3-4 seeds. Cover lightly as light aids in germination. Keep seeds moist until plants emerge.

Thin to one plant every 10–15” when true leaves appear.

The germination time for columbine seeds is 21–28 days.

If you are using taller cultivars and not harvesting blooms regularly, the plants may need staking.

Pinch dead blooms to encourage a longer bloom period. You may also want to pinch blooms to discourage self-sowing.

HARVEST:

Harvest columbine for fresh cut flowers when half of the florets on a stem are open.

PERENNIAL CARE

Columbines are generally short-lived with an average lifespan of 3–4 years. Remove dying or diseased foliage by cutting the plants back to the bottom layer of foliage once they have stopped blooming. This will alleviate some pest pressure and it may have the bonus of triggering a second flush of growth and blooms. If desired, you can divide plants.

WINTER PROTECTION

Columbine is a perennial in zones 3–9. Plants are hardy to -13°F (-25°C) but they can benefit from winter mulching in cold climates. Mulch the plants

after the first frost to protect the plants from heaving associated with freeze and thaw cycles.

PESTS & DISEASE

The most common pest to attack columbine is the leaf miner. Leaf miners are insect larvae that feed on tissue inside the leaves, causing irregular serpentine patterns on the leaves. They rarely cause damage to plant health, but the marks they leave on the leaves can diminish the quality of columbine as a cut flower. To deter leaf miners, use pyrethrum or neem oil according to package instructions. Remove and destroy any infected leaves as you find them.

Columbine sawfly is another potential pest. Hand pick the columbine sawfly caterpillars or use an insecticidal soap.

DISEASES

Columbine is not particularly susceptible to disease, but it can become infected with fungal diseases such as downy mildew. You can take some precautions to reduce the risk of fungal disease while starting plants indoors: ensure good air circulations and do not overwater. To reduce the risk of fungal disease outdoors, keep weeds down, use drip irrigation instead of overhead watering, and do not plant more densely than recommended. Remove infected leaves.



‘McKana Giant’ columbine in trials at Johnny’s research farm in Albion, Maine