

Aquilegia vulgaris (European Columbine)

Botanical Bytes by Bruner

By Gregory Bruner

Foliage Height: 10-12”
Foliage Width: 10-12”
Flower Height: 12-18”
Foliage Color: Green
Flower Color: Naturally Blue
USDA Hardiness: 3-8
Moisture: Average
Light: Partial Sun – Shade



Aquilegia vulgaris is native to Central and Southern Europe, Northern Africa, and some temperate parts of China. This woodland beauty is known by many names—European or Common Columbine, Granny’s Bonnet, or Granny’s Nightcap. These names are descriptive of the flower’s unique shape, perhaps reminding you of an article of your great-grandmother’s clothing. On the other hand, *Aquilegia* is derived from the Latin word *Aquila*, which means eagle and refers to the flower’s five spurs that look somewhat like an eagle’s talons.

The beautiful flowers are as much a part of Spring as crocus and daffodils. They will tolerate most average, well-drained gardens in a partial sun location. More sun is OK in more northern areas; conversely, more shade is needed for columbine to thrive in warmer, more humid southern areas. When columbine is found in the wild, it is generally growing in rich, moist soils in woodland locations that offer moderate shade.

The foliage has a wonderfully unique fine lacy texture, which is persistent throughout the summer and winter if adequate moisture is available. In the heat of the summer, leaf miners will sometimes leave their marks upon the foliage; however, this damage is cosmetic only and should not kill the plant.

The wildlife aspects of this beauty are extensive for this workhorse of the garden. Color ranges of its cultivars are blue, white, pink, and red. The flower’s nectar attracts hummingbirds and butterflies, while small birds enjoy its seeds. Deer and rabbits seldom bother this plant. The flowers also have excellent life as cut flowers. What more could you ask for from a leafy family member?

I have always loved the new dimensions that history and legends add to gardening. *Aquilegia vulgaris* brings one story from the Bible. According to a legend, these tiny flowers sprang up from the ground wherever Mary’s feet touched the earth on her journey to visit her cousin, Elizabeth. It also is said that a bouquet of European Columbine will attract the attention of a loved one—more likely if the bouquet is actually given to a lady by her special someone.

Because of the early spring firepower of this woodland wonder, it is definitely worth finding a place for it in your garden. Whether you are trying to attract birds and butterflies with the uniquely shaped flowers or just enjoying its fine lacy foliage later in the summer, *Aquilegia vulgaris* is a winner.