

When it comes to seeing red wildflowers, there are only a precious few of our wildflowers that would qualify as near the red spectrum. What are some? The red buckeye, *Aesculus pavia*, scarlet salvia, *Salvia coccinea*, mamou, *Erythrina herbacea*, coral honeysuckle, *Lonicera sempervirens*, the rare red penstemon, *Penstemon murrayanus*, and the showy red cardinal flower, *Lobelia cardinalis*, to name a few and these are most of them. Perhaps this is the reason why there is only the single species of hummingbirds, the ruby-throated hummingbird, that has taken up summer residence in the eastern United States. While to the west of us, in the Rocky Mountains, and on into California and the Pacific Northwest, there are several summer red wildflowers that bloom and contain nectar for hummingbirds.

Cardinal flower is generally a short-lived perennial of moist and wet areas, beloved by pickers of wildflowers, the public in general and gardeners in particular. They are loved even better by white-tailed deer as a food or maybe even as a dessert item. They grow in moist areas with full sun or light shade. Most of the year they are merely a basal rosette of dark green leaves. The leafy stem bolts upright in the spring and summer. In the fall, they produce their spectacular terminal raceme above, diminishing in size to almost lanceolate leaves. The color is vibrant, outstanding, and simply beautiful to behold and for the wildflower pickers, to behold! All of this happens all during the year and the climax comes with the autumn rains and usually before hard frosts of late November. In addition to being a bright red, the flowers are tubular with two upper lip petals and three lower lipped ones, all of a uniform red color.

As beautiful as they are to see in nature, they make good garden ornaments, just in time for the late hummingbirds to sip the nectar for their long flight back to the tropics. The flowers develop into seed capsules and each capsule contains many dark seeds which are easily grown into plants for the garden or which can be sown in suitable sites along moist creek banks, around springs, ponds or small lakes. They really do not seem to prosper in bottom lands where the areas are flooded for any length of time.

The cardinal flower isn't the only red species to bloom, as there are red ones from Mexico, and other tropical countries. Now the hybridizers are at work making several hybrids that begin blooming in midsummer into the fall and in various colors of red, pink, blue, purple, and violet. I suspect this is a plant with a future. As lovely as they are in the yard, there is something to see a truly wild cardinal flower growing in its native wet area. As they are so easily grown from seed, there is no need to dig the plants to the yard, which is easily done, also. Carl Amason is a superior plantsman who lives and gardens near Callion, Arkansas.