

Fairies in the Garden

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The genus *Aquilegia* contains some of my favorite flowers; columbines are graceful fairies dancing in the breeze in almost every rainbow color. The native columbine, *Aquilegia Canadensis*, waltzes in the woodland, reseeding merrily until you have a “forest” of the pale red and yellow flowers. Most columbines would like a touch of sun, but will bloom even in three hours of sun, and can even be happy in high shade (like the north side of your house under open sky).

Most people know the McKana Hybrids, which are huge (half the size of my fist) flowers with long spurs (little tails of flower) and come in all sorts of gorgeous color combinations, but the genus contains all sorts of flowers.

Aquilegia chrysantha is one of the longest blooming columbines for me; it goes for about 6 weeks, starting in mid-May and hanging on to greet the early daylilies. It also has the longest spurs and is a clear yellow. The Queen series (White Queen, Yellow Queen) were developed using chrysantha, and they have some of the same lasting qualities, but they have larger flowers.

The flabellatas tend to have very blue foliage and compact plants; they work very well in a rock garden where their diminutive size isn't lost among the giants. The flabellatas are under a foot, and the spurs are very short, and often curled slightly. If you're looking for short columbines that will fit into the regular garden, try the Biedermeier Hybrids, which have very short spurs and up-facing flowers.

Most of the vulgaris cultivars are double, nodding, and without spurs, which makes them look unrelated until you look at the foliage. I'm not fond of them, but I do have one that is two-toned, and that is very pretty. The many Barlow hybrids (from Nora Barlow, which is the least attractive of them, in my opinion) are also nodding, and the flower is a half-sphere with the petals forming a spiky appearance. Some of the maroon Barlows are very pretty as a dainty counterpoint in the garden.

Some of the more unusual columbines are very pretty, while others are just curiosities. *A. cernua* is one of the curiosities. It has hanging maroon flowers on a 4- or 5-inch plant, but the flowers are contained within a long “bract” of yellow-green. *Aquilegia transylvanica* is what you might expect—dark, brooding, purple-black flowers—but it's quite pretty. It also seems to be short-lived.

Aquilegia alpina is gorgeous, with nodding blue-lavender flowers on a 24-30 inch plant. The color of the flowers is very similar to some of the blue iris that bloom at that time (like the tall, bearded ‘Stepping Out’).

Aquilegia scopulorum (blue), *Aquilegia barnebyi* (pink and yellow), and *Aquilegia chaplinii* (yellow) are all rock garden denizens because they require excellent drainage.

Columbines will reseed, and as with any seed-grown plant, the seedlings won't necessarily look anything like the parents. They are difficult to divide, which is the reason that you often can't choose the specific color you want. They begin blooming in mid-May, and there is a little green worm (very scientific, isn't it? I think it's a sawfly's larvae) that will eat all the foliage off your plants in early June. It doesn't seem to hurt the columbine, but you can hand-pick or spray with Bt. Columbines also often get leaf-miner, which makes twirling light patterns on the leaves, but doesn't seem to usually hurt the plant either. Columbines tend to be short-lived perennials, with a three- to five-year life span, but I've had the same chrysantha plant for about eight years. They like well-drained soil. Some, like chrysantha and its cultivars, are quite tall (30-36”), and others are quite short. *A. canadensis* is the most shade-tolerant.

Although this year's columbine display is almost over, please stop out next spring to see many different varieties in bloom...if you come in early June, you will also get to see the Siberian iris display.

—Jean Bawden, Earthspirit Farm

Earthspirit Farm, 4385 Oak Hill Road, Oregon (835-8907), will have an Open Garden on July 20, 21 and 27 from 10 a.m.-5:00 p.m. The nursery sells hosta, daylilies, Japanese and Siberian iris, ornamental shrubs for the perennial border, and a few select perennials.