

Common Names Columbine

Plant Type Flower

Height: 14"-20"

Spread: 12"-20"

USDA Zones: 3-9

Bloom Season: Spring Summer

Light: Full Sun

Soil: Well-draining

Description

The columbine plant (*Aquilegia*) is an easy-to-grow perennial that offers seasonal interest throughout much of the year. It blooms in a variety of colors during spring, which emerge from its attractive dark green foliage that turns maroon-colored in fall. The bell-shaped flowers are also a favorite to hummingbirds and may be used in cut-flower arrangements as well.

Sowing Columbine Seed

- Columbine will germinate best if sown in seed trays or pots and **chilled (refrigerated) at 40 degrees F for 3 to 4 weeks.**
- Sow indoors using a seed starting kit
- Just cover the seeds lightly with seed starting formula
- Keep the soil moist at **65-70 degrees F**
- Seedlings emerge in **22-30 days**
- As soon as seedlings emerge, provide plenty of light on a sunny windowsill or grow seedlings 3-4 inches beneath fluorescent plant lights turned on 16 hours per day, off for 8 hours at night. Raise the lights as the plants grow taller. Incandescent bulbs will not work for this process because they will get too hot. Most plants require a dark period to grow, do not leave lights on for 24 hours.
- **Columbine seedlings do not need much fertilizer,** feed when they are 3-4 weeks old using a starter solution (half strength of a complete indoor houseplant food) according to manufacturer's directions.
- **Before planting in the garden, columbine seedling plants need to be "hardened off."** Accustom young plants to outdoor conditions by moving them to a sheltered place outside for a week. Be sure to protect them from wind and hot sun at first. If frost threatens at night, cover or bring containers indoors, then take them out again in the morning. This hardening off process toughens the plant's cell structure and reduces transplant shock and scalding.

How to Grow Columbine Flowers

- **Keep weeds under control during the columbine growing season.** Weeds compete with plants for water, space and nutrients, so control them by either cultivating often or use a mulch to prevent their germination.
- Mulches also help retain soil moisture and maintain even soil temperatures. For perennials, an organic mulch of aged bark or shredded leaves lends a natural look to the bed and will improve the soil as it breaks down in time. Always keep mulches off a plant's stems to prevent possible rot.
- Careful watering is essential in getting perennials off to a good start. Water thoroughly at least once a week to help new roots grow down deeply. Soil should be damp at about 1 inch below the soil surface. You can check this by sticking your finger in the soil. Water early in the morning to give all leaves enough time to dry. One inch of rain or watering per week is recommended for most perennial plants. You can check to see if you need to add water by using a rain gauge.
- Until plants become established, some protection from extreme winds and direct, hot sunlight may be necessary. Good air movement is also important.
- After new growth appears, a light fertilizer may be applied. Keep granular fertilizers away from the plant crown and foliage to avoid burn injury. Use low rates of a slow release fertilizer, as higher rates may encourage root rots.
- **Do not deadhead** unless you want to eliminate self-sown columbine seedlings.

Growing Tips

- Taller cultivars may need staking.
- Columbines are lovely for borders and excellent for naturalizing woodlands.
- The blooms make good cut flowers, and the seedpods make interesting additions to dried arrangements.
- Compact cultivars may be grown in containers.