

CULVER'S ROOT

By Shirley Froehlich, BSA

Tall. Elegant. Breathtaking. Distinctive. These words all describe the rare and beautiful Culver's Root *Veronicastrum virginicum*, a wildflower of the Tall Grass Prairie. It is an excellent plant for landscaping, whether it be for flower beds or prairie meadows. It is also a good cut flower for either fresh or dried arrangements.

Have you ever wondered how the plant got its name? And who was Culver anyway? Well, the roots had a number of medicinal uses in the past so perhaps Culver was an old medicine man or woman who knew and used the plant for its curative properties. There is no reference to Culver in the literature so this is only speculation.

DESCRIPTION

The bushy, robust plants have deep green, lanceolate leaves arranged in whorls up the stem. The flowers crown the top of the plants with slender, white spikes in late July and early August. Occasionally they have a tinge of mauve. They bloom for about 3 weeks and grow 90-120 cm tall (3-4 feet). The plants remain attractive even when finished blooming with the flower spikes changing to dark brown as the seed ripens.

NATIVE HABITAT

Culver's Root is a rare plant in Manitoba. It can be seen growing in parts of the Tall Grass Prairie Preserve in the Tolstoi-Gardenton area near the Manitoba-U.S. border. Even at this location only occasional plants are present. It is more common in the tall grass prairies of southern Ontario and all across the Midwestern and eastern United States, where it grows 120-180 cm tall (4-6 feet).

CULTURE

Culver's Root prefers the full sun of the wide open prairie and medium to moist soil. It is quite happy growing in the heavy clay soils of the Red River Valley.

To establish Culver's Root in the garden, plants can be set out in spring after the danger of frost is past, or in summer. These plants are a little slow growing and take about three years to mature, however you are rewarded for your patience with handsome specimens that live a long time.

It is also quite easy to start your own plants indoors from seed. This species needs stratifying (a cool, moist treatment) for six weeks before germination. I find it easiest to seed the trays, water and then put them in a fridge or cold room to stratify. It germinates well in 5-10 days with bottom heat around 21 degrees C. Bottom heat can be provided by heating cables or by setting the tray just above a hot air register until germination begins. The seed of this variety is very small so care must be taken when seeding. Do not cover the seed with media and do not spread it too thick. Use a mister or very fine spray for watering in the beginning so that the seed is not washed into a corner or deep into the growing mix. If the seedlings come up very thick, they should be thinned out to prevent

damping off and rotting. When germinated in mid-March they will be ready to plant in the garden in early June.

In the garden Culver's Root is excellent as a focal point or accent. When grouped together in a flower bed or at the back of a perennial border it puts on quite a show in midsummer. It is especially attractive against a dark coloured fence. Culver's Root is also at home mixed with other wildflowers and grasses in a prairie meadow. It does well in combination with other prairie plants such as Golden Alexander, False Sunflower, Meadow Blazing Star, Narrowleaf Sunflower, New England Aster, Awned Wheatgrass and Big Bluestem.

If you want to see Culver's Root growing in Manitoba you have several choices. You can see it in the wild in the Tall Grass Prairie Preserve in Tolstoi. You can also see several large masses of it that have been planted at the Forks Historic Site in downtown Winnipeg. It is in the flowerbed by the flag and the Path of Time sculpture. When you see it "up close and personal" I'm sure you will agree that this gorgeous perennial would enhance any garden.

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