

## BWSR Featured Plant

**Name: Red Columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*)**

Also called: Wild Columbine, American Columbine

**Plant Family: Ranunculaceae (Buttercup)**

Statewide Wetland  
Indicator Status:

- Great Plains: FAC
- Midwest: FACU
- NC & NE: FACU



Red Columbine growing in a woodland garden

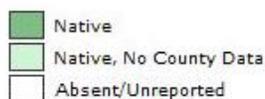
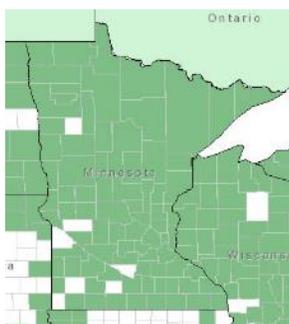
A popular plant in woodland gardens, Red Columbine is tolerant of a wide range of soils and light levels, and is an early blooming food source for pollinators. While there are many other columbine species found in the United States and Canada, Red Columbine is the only Minnesota native *Aquilegia* species. It is widespread in the state, as it can grow in habitats ranging from rock outcrops and bluff prairies to oak forests.

### Identification

Red Columbine plants reach one to three feet tall and have fibrous roots that sometimes spread via rhizomes. Leaves are alternate and compound with three rounded leaflets that are up to three inches long and wide. Flowers are made up of five yellow petals surrounded by five red petal-like sepals. Each flower is one to two inches long and hangs downward. The flowers are replaced by five pod-shaped green capsules. Black shiny seeds are released when the sides of the capsules split open.



Reddish green stem are smooth or pubescent



Range based on University of MN Herbarium data

### Range

Although Red Columbine is the only native Columbine in Minnesota, it is widespread across the state and is commonly planted in gardens, shady stormwater plantings and restoration projects. The species is native to the United States and Canada from the eastern coast to western Nebraska, predominantly in the northern half of the country.



Red Columbine leaves

## Uses

As an attractive and easy to grow plant, Red Columbine makes a great addition to gardens and does well in areas of shade and low nutrients. The nectar of Red Columbine is collected by Ruby-Throated Hummingbirds and bumblebees. Short-tongued bees and bumblebees collect the pollen from its long stamens. Mammals rarely disturb the plant as the foliage is toxic to them. The larvae of Columbine sawfly (*Pristophora aquiligae*) feed on the leaves and can be very destructive, defoliating the plant if not dealt with early in the season. University of Minnesota Extension has [tips for dealing with Columbine sawfly](#).

### Primary Uses:

- Home gardens
- Shady pollinator plantings
- Shady stormwater plantings



Red Columbine plant

Image G.D. Bebeau of *The Friends of the Wild Flower Garden*

## Planting Recommendations

Sun preference is light to medium shade and moist soils, however the plant tolerates a wide range of sun and soil as long as there is good drainage. Seeds are easily collected from plants or purchased from most seed suppliers and nurseries. Seeds should be planted in the fall to allow for a period of cold moist stratification over winter to break the seed coat. Plants can also be transplanted from clumps in early spring or planted from containers.

### Planting Methods

- Seeds
- Transplants
- Containers



Early Meadow Rue Flowers

Image by Peter M. Dziuk of *Minnesota Wildflowers*

## Similar Species

The compound and rounded leaves of Red Columbine and Early Meadow Rue (*Thalictrum dioicum*) are very similar, the latter with longer stalks. Early Meadow Rue flowers also have drooping yellow stamens in bunches; however, the flowers lack petals.

Prairie Smoke (*Geum triflorum*) shares a red inverted flower, similar to the bell-shaped flowers of Red Columbine but it has leaves up to seven inches long with pointed leaflets. The leaves and stems are also hairy. Its range in Minnesota covers the western, central, and southeastern portions of the state. It also flowers in early spring, however once pollinated, the dried seeds have a two-inch long plume with fine white hairs resembling smoke.



Early Meadow Rue leaves  
Image by Katy Chayka of *Minnesota Wildflowers*



Prairie Smoke

Image by Peter M. Dziuk of *Minnesota Wildflowers*

## References

<https://www.extension.umn.edu>, <http://www.illinoiswildflowers.info>,  
<https://www.minnesotawildflowers.info>, <http://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org>,  
<https://plants.usda.gov>, <https://www.prairiemoon.com>

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