

Culver's Root

Veronicastrum virginicum

Culver's Root is a tall, durable perennial that can provide strong, yet airy structure to a landscape. Its stems grow 3 to 6 feet high, and are topped with clusters of erect, thin, candelabra-like spikes of flowers. Each spike, up to 8" long, holds numerous blossoms that are creamy white to pale pink (sometimes blue), with yellow stamens that play with the sunlight and seem to glow from within.



The sturdy stem of Culver's Root is round, smooth and unbranched except near the inflorescence. Along the stem, dark green whorled leaves are arranged in groups of 3 to 8. These leaves are up to 6" long and 1½" wide, narrowly ovate, with serrated margins. The root system has a central taproot as well as underground stems (rhizomes) which enable vegetative reproduction. The tubular flowers, about ¼" long, have no scent, and last about a month in mid to late summer. Small seeds are produced in large quantities within woody capsules, and dispersed by the wind.

A member of the Scrophulariaceae (Snapdragon) family, this plant was named after Dr. Couvert, an American physician that popularized the plant's use for folk medicine in the 18th century. It is native throughout eastern North America, occurring in moist to mesic prairies, woodland edges, and swampy meadows along rivers and ditches. While widely distributed, it is not often seen and is listed as threatened or endangered in some states. It is not often found in disturbed habitats.

This plant's tall spikes of flowers produce nectar and pollen in abundance for pollinators. It is recognized as having special value for native bees and honey bees. Other insect visitors include butterflies, moths, Sphecid wasps, and Syrphid flies. Culver's Root is rarely bothered by leaf-chewing insects or mammalian herbivores. The seeds are too tiny to be interest to birds.

Culver's Root is adaptable and easily to grow in gardens, yet is not overly aggressive. It provides a dramatic show when massed for effect. It may also be mixed with other perennials in border areas, wildflower meadows, wetlands, rain gardens and along woodland edges. This plant prefers sun to part-shade and moist, acidic, loamy soil; but tolerates sand and clay.

Culver's Root is most easily propagated by divisions in the late fall or early spring. Each root segment must have a bud to be successful. Seeds should be sown in fall to provide cold stratification. The flowers are lovely in cut arrangements, lasting up to a week. If left standing, the strong structural appearance of Culver's Root provides nice winter interest.

For more information and photos:

<http://www.illinoiswildflowers.info/prairie/plantx/culverx.htm>

http://plants.usda.gov/factsheet/pdf/fs_vevi4.pdf

http://www.wildflower.org/plants/result.php?id_plant=VEVI4