

## ~ Ask Granny Earth ~

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Lobelia

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**I would like to grow some Lobelia for medicinal purposes. Is it hard to grow? What all is it good for?**

There are several species of Lobelia that are being sold at local garden shops. The most common that I've seen has lots of little purple flowers, but it is not *Lobelia inflata*, which is the species that is used for medicinal purposes.

**Lobelia inflata:** Named after botanist Matthias de Lobel who lived in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Lobelia is commonly known as "Indian Tobacco", because the American Indians used to smoke it as a substitute for tobacco, and to treat bronchial complaints and coughs. They used it internally in high doses as a 'puke weed' to induce vomiting, and in smaller doses as an expectorant.

*Lobelia inflata* is indigenous to North America, and is found in abundance in the Eastern part of the country. It grows by roadsides, in woods and open fields, preferring rich, acid, moist soil, and full sun to partial shade. It's an annual plant, self-seeding, or needing to be replanted each year. *Lobelia inflata* grows from 1 to 2 feet high, and has a hairy, angular stem. The leaves

are thin and light green, alternate, and bluntly serrate. It produces numerous, small, two-lipped blue flowers (which stay open for 3-10 days) from July to October. Gather Lobelia after it flowers, and before the plant goes to seed.

I found one Lobelia plant growing in my garden last fall, and identified it by comparing the leaves and flowers with pictures in my herb books, and also checking with my "Yule Gibbons" friend from Markleysburg, Wess Lindner.

Then, when it formed seed- pods, I collected them. When the pods dried out, I broke them open, and let the seeds fall into an envelope. Each small pod contained many very tiny dark brown seeds. I stored them in my 'seed box' for planting the following spring. Then in February, I planted them in my hotbed, and waited for them to sprout. It took a long time, but finally they began to grow. I now have what looks to be, several hundred, baby Lobelia plants, but they are still very small, and really close together. I anticipate that in a few weeks they will be ready for transplanting. Wild crafting, and harvesting your own seeds is not only exciting and very rewarding, but it also saves a lot of money. The yield is usually so large that you'll end up having enough plants to give some away to friends. An extra bonus; sharing is healing!

As for Lobelia's medicinal qualities and uses, there are many, and there is also some controversy surrounding its safety. Traditional uses are: anti-spasmodic, emetic (causes vomiting in large doses), expectorant, stimulant, diuretic, nervine (supports nervous system), and diaphoretic, (in large doses causes sweating, thereby releasing toxins). In small doses it has been used for asthma, whooping cough, bronchial spasms, epilepsy, cramps, and hysteria.

Because it is primarily a strong relaxing herb, I believe that Lobelia should be used along with other herbs in a formula, as a catalyst to improve the performance of all the other herbs. I use a small amount in my Respitone Lung Elixir to relax the cells of the bronchials so that the other herbs could more readily pull out, and expel the toxins that are causing infection. The late Dr. Christopher said, "Lobelia is the *thinking herb*, because it exerts its effects anywhere in the body where it is needed most."

While a lot of the old time herbal healers were fond of using Lobelia in their formulas, and even though Lobeline (the main alkaloid in Lobelia) was once approved by the FDA as a -stop smoking- aid (the nicotine receptor in the body can be occupied by lobeline, reducing the urge for nicotine, and lobeline is non-habit forming), the FDA has now restricted its use. They appear to have done this, because over-dose of Lobelia can cause excessive salivation, diarrhea, disturbed hearing and vision, mental confusion, weakness, lowered blood pressure, weak, rapid or erratic pulse, difficult breathing, and death from respiratory depression. However, as Robin Langer, of Snowbound Herbals says, "All of these symptoms are the same as for nicotine overdose."

Lobelia may be used with confidence for the purposes it is intended in the correct amounts."

So, while Lobelia has been used for over 200 years as a medicinal herb, one needs to be very careful about ingesting, or administrating it. A long time ago, my son, Jim sent me a homemade tincture of Lobelia, telling me it was good for anxiety. I made the mistake of ingesting it prior to going out to a political meeting. All during the meeting, I kept dozing off. When I got home I read up on Lobelia, and found that it was one of Nature's most powerful relaxing herbs!

It's always good to remember that when using controversial herbs, one should seek the experience of a knowledgeable (herbal) practitioner.