

*Lobelia inflata*

[Synonyms : *Rapuntium inflatum*]

**LOBELIA** is an annual or biennial. Native to eastern North America it has many small, pale blue or bluish violet (often tinted yellow or violet inside), and white flowers.

It is also known as Asthma weed, Bladderpod, Bladder podded lobelia, *Blasenlobelie* (German), Colic weed, Emetic herb, Emetic weed, Eyebright, Field lobelia, Gagroot, *Indianertabak* (German), Indian tobacco, Kinnikinnik, *Läkelobelia* (Swedish), *Lobelie* (German), Low belia, Obelia, Pukeweed, Purge weed, *Rohtolobelia* (Finnish), Thomson's herb, Tobacco lobelia, Vomitroot, Vomitwort, and Wild tobacco; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of arrogance, and malevolence.

Warning – the plant is potentially poisonous and should only be used under the supervision of qualified practitioners. It can be purgative and can cause convulsions, vomiting, excessive perspiration, pain, reduced body temperature, rapid pulse, paralysis, collapse, coma and death. (Although it is on the restricted list in the United States it should be noted that no official records of such symptoms exist in Britain.) It can also irritate the skin. It can be fatally poisonous for some animals, which normally avoid it.

*Inflata* is derived from Latin *inflatio* (inflation) meaning 'inflated or swollen'.

For the Iroquois North American Indians lobelia could be taken both as an aphrodisiac and an aphrodisiac.

The plant played a role in ceremonial ritual performed by the Crow tribe – and the Cherokee Indians used it as an insecticide to smoke out gnats.

Some North American Indian tribes including the Penobscot are believed to have used the bitter-tasting leaves for medicinal purposes, and smoked them (dried) especially to ease some respiratory disorders such as asthma. For the Cherokee and Iroquois Indians it was a remedy for boils or sores, it could be given to cause vomiting and could also be used as an aid to stopping smoking – or drinking. The Iroquois also turned to it for treating venereal disease and the Cherokee applied it to insect bites.

It was used by early North American settlers for a whole range of ailments without undue concern until the case of Samuel Thomson (1769-1843) in 1809. Thomson was a noted American herbalist and founder of Thomsonian Medicine (Friendly Botanical societies which came to be known colloquially as 'Thomsonians'). In 1793 he had begun to promote his theories and lobelia fitted into these as a cleansing emetic (supported by the use of herbal teas, cayenne pepper (*Capsicum annuum* var. *longum*), steam baths and tonics) – so much so that his peers almost came to believe that lobelia was a panacea. Then in 1809 he was arrested and accused of murder after one of his patients died of alleged lobelia poisoning – but he was acquitted for lack of evidence. It seems that the trial did not undermine his reputation significantly as records note that hundreds and hundreds of Thomsonians sprang up in the following years and he claimed to have three million followers by 1839. However the end was in sight as in 1836 one of his henchman had decided to set up in competition and this eventually burst the bubble and allowed the possibly unrealistic use of lobelia to settle into more pragmatic conventions.

Lobelia was introduced to British medicine in 1829 (having reached Europe a few years earlier) and herbalists recommended it for the treatment of whooping-cough, croup and tetanus. It

was also used for various inflammatory ailments such as diphtheria, tonsillitis and tetanus. Externally it was employed in ophthalmology and was also applied as a tincture to sprains, bruises, boils, ulcers and skin diseases. Today its reputation continues for the treatment of various respiratory disorders such as asthma and bronchitis, and it has also become a significant ingredient in some proprietary anti-smoking mixtures as its properties help to alleviate withdrawal symptoms. Chinese medicine uses lobelia in similar ways to its Western counterpart, as well as including it in remedies for jaundice and snake bites.