

# Coral-bells for Canadian gardens



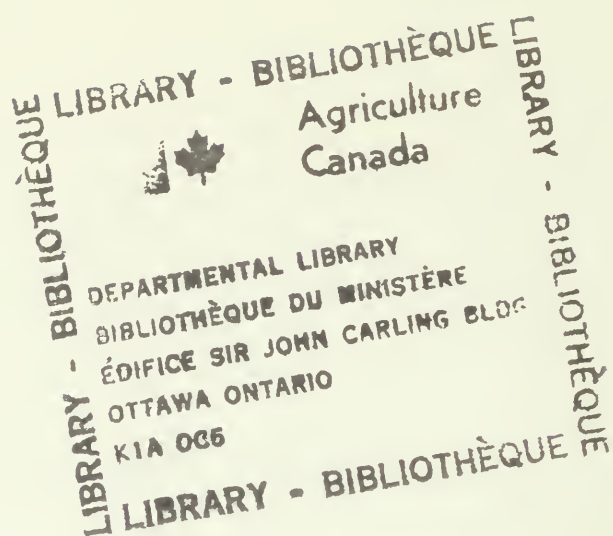
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COVER PHOTO: Northern Fire coral-bells.

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# Coral-bells

## for Canadian gardens

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Attractive garden coral-bells have been developed for Canadian gardeners, including those residing in the prairie region. These charming herbaceous perennials thrive on well-drained garden soil, are drought tolerant, and are not easily damaged by wind. They form tufts of near-evergreen lobed leaves and bear many small showy flowers on stems 50–80 cm in height. The red or rosy colored flowers are attractive both in the garden and in floral arrangements.

### Description

Coral-bells belong to the genus *Heuchera*, a widely distributed group of species native to North America. They range from southern Mexico to Alaska and to the east coast excepting the northeast one third of the continent. Unfortunately the red-flowered species, native to Mexico and New Mexico, are not hardy in most of Canada. The hardy northern species include those that have flowers in various shades of brown, green, or yellow as well as species that have small but numerous flowers reduced to anthers and pistils. The many native species have similar leaf and plant characters and readily hybridize.

The thick rootstock, or rhizome, of all species is rich in tannin, hence very astringent, leading to the name alumroot. The thick near-evergreen leaves resemble the common geranium in outline, suggesting another name, rock geranium. It is interesting that the colored parts of the flower in coral-bells are the calyx and its basal tube, or hypanthium, whereas the petals are small and inconspicuous. The tiny, black, rough-coated seeds react vigorously when shaken on a sheet of paper, suggesting static electricity may be involved in their dispersal. The papery pods could have the same effect when shaken by a dry wind.

Garden strains seem to be hybrids between the red-flowered *Heuchera sanguinea* Engelm. from Mexico, and more hardy species such as *H. americana* L., which bears green, sometimes red-tinged flowers. Those recommended for the prairies were derived from crosses with *H. Richardsonii* R. Br., another green-flowered species widespread on the prairies and as far north as Fort Simpson, District of McKenzie. The original crosses with the red-flowered forms were made at the Agriculture Canada Research Station, Brandon, Manitoba, followed by further selection at the Agriculture Canada Research Station, Morden, Manitoba. This has resulted in the development of the cultivars Brandon Pink, Brandon Glow, and Northern Fire for the prairie region.

## Growing conditions

Coral-bells prefer well-drained, moderately moist soil similar to that found in most good garden sites. They are not adapted to heavy wet soils. They can tolerate long dry periods but do not bloom while under stress. The wiry 60-cm stems sway freely in the breeze and are not easily damaged by wind. Foliage remains attractive in fairly deep shade, but flowers are more plentiful on plants growing in a sunny location. Plants grow slowly and become larger and more attractive for several years, after which they should be renewed by division.

They blend well with larger-flowered perennial species, both in the garden and in arrangements. Coral-bells can be used effectively alone or in small groups in a perennial border among such plants as irises, day-lilies, and lilies. They perform best when grown without disturbance for several years.

## Propagation

Coral-bells are normally propagated either by division or by seed. Because seed strains are not recommended for the prairies, the hardy cultivars are generally propagated by division. Plants can be divided either in the spring or in the fall, but the optimum time seems to be just after they have flowered in July or August. Pieces for propagation may vary widely in size, but with proper handling most sizes will produce plants. Large pieces of rhizome, 5–10 cm long with a tuft of 6–10 leaves, can be planted directly in moist soil in the garden in late August and will root in a few weeks with only moderate watering. Small pieces less than 5 cm



Cuttings of coral-bells prepared for propagation showing large cuttings (*left*) and smaller cuttings (*right*).

long also root well, but require greater handling care and more time to develop into strong plants.

Leaf-bud cuttings taken in July, or whenever available in the greenhouse, will root under mist or controlled humidity. Each leaf can be cut with a small shield of rhizome attached and dipped in 1000 parts per million of indolebutyric acid rooting hormone, the strength commonly used for softwood cuttings, or slips. The cuttings will root in about 3 weeks and can then be transferred to pots or flats and grown in a cool greenhouse or planted in outdoor nursery beds.

Because plants grown from seed are small and grow slowly, careful handling is necessary. Seeds should be sown on the surface of porous soil in late winter. Soil amendments that float when heavily watered can be very destructive to newly emerged seedlings; therefore water must be applied gently at this stage. When the seedlings are large enough to handle they can be moved to flats to continue their slow growth.

## Recommended cultivars

In the milder parts of Canada, several seed strains are useful including the Bressingham Hybrids, Sanguinea Splendens, and Firefly strains. The following coral-bell cultivars recommended for the prairies are increased vegetatively and are commercially available.


Brandon Pink is an  $F_1$  composite from *H. Richardsonii*  $\times$  *H. sanguinea* and the reciprocal. It grows as a low mound of faintly white-mottled, near-evergreen leaves, from which many 60-cm panicles of small bell-shaped flowers arise. The flowers are deep pink (RHS 51 A) (Royal Horticultural Society color designation), and are produced in abundance in June and early July and occasionally later in the summer.

Brandon Glow has darker-colored flowers than Brandon Pink and they are produced over a long season beginning in June. The foliage is distinctly mottled with white and the flower stalks are 45 cm tall, with an open-branched form. The bell-shaped flowers are delft rose (RHS 47 C). Brandon Glow has recently shown susceptibility to rhizoctonia root disease, which has limited its use in southern regions of the prairies.

Northern Fire was derived from Brandon Pink through a series of open-pollinated selections. The numerous bell-shaped flowers are borne from early June to mid-July on many panicles up to 60 cm in height. The sepal color ranges from currant red (RHS 46 B) at the tips to delft rose (RHS 46 D) at the base. Petals are small and the anthers are imperfect.

## Disease and insect problems

Few serious problems have been experienced in growing hardy coral-bells. All are intolerant to poorly drained soils, which can lead to root injury or disease. Aphids have occasionally attacked young flower stalks but are easily controlled by sprays recommended for these insects. A rust similar to that on hollyhock has been observed, but Brandon Pink and Northern Fire have good resistance.



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