

Indian Pink – An Exotic Native

Native plants have numerous advantages. Obviously, they do well in New Jersey since it is their home! They also provide the nectar or in some cases high protein pollen that is the food for our native pollinators. The challenge for gardeners is the absence of brightly colored flowers that many of the Tropical and Asian plants display. Fortunately, several colorful options are available, including the Indian Pink, *Spigelia marilandica* that remains largely unknown amongst NJ gardeners.

Spigelia is a member of the Loganiaceae, a family that consists mostly of tropical genera and may in part explain the tropical appearance of Indian Pink's flowers! The name of the genus was penned by Carl Linnaeus in 1753, in honor of the Flemish physician and botanical author Adriaan van den Spiegel (1578-1625). In the late 1500's, the concept of drying flowers and leaves as herbarium specimen was relatively new. Spiegel published a paper in 1606 on the techniques of drying plant specimens, a process that was used extensively by Linnaeus during his career of classifying plants. Hence, his adoration for the Flemish physician! The species epithet literally means 'of Maryland', describing the region from which Linnaeus thought it to be native. Although hardy to regions much further north, Maryland is in fact its most northerly natural boundary, with most of the species populating the SE region of North America. Prior to its use as an ornamental, the plant had gained some prominence as a medicinal due to the presence of the alkaloid spigeline. It was used by the Native American Indians to induce visions during



ceremonies, supposedly allowing an individual to foresee the future. Alluding to its other medicinal benefit, the plant was also called Worm Grass.

Alexander Garden (1728-1791) a medical doctor and the namesake of the genus *Gardenia*, learned from the Cherokee Indians that the roots of the plant could be used as a vermifuge to treat and remove intestinal worms. He sent roots back to England in 1752, along with notes extolling its medicinal virtues. Its anthelmintic use in the US became standard medical practice up until 1926 when the associated risk of convulsions, stupors and death from improper dosages

finally outweighed its ability to kill worms!

As an ornamental, *Spigelia* is far more human friendly! The plants are clump forming, sending up willowy, four sided stems that grow to 18-24" in height. The slender stems boast 4-7 pairs of



oppositely arranged leaves. The leaves range from 2-4" long and upwards of 3" wide, providing a rather coarse, overall texture to the plant. In late May through June, the tips of the stems are host to the most exquisite blooms. The flower buds slowly elongate, ultimately maturing to 1 ½" long, bright red tubes. At maturity, the tip of the floral tube splits open, presenting five, short and sharply pointed bright yellow lobes. The opening of the tube also reveals the bright yellow center of the flower along with a very dominant stigma projecting from the center of the tube. A very

tropical appearance! Adding to this colorful revelry is the attraction of Hummingbirds to the flowers. Bright red, tubular flowers with ample nectar production act as a natural magnet for Hummingbirds and *Spigelia* is a Hummingbird seductress!

For a rather exotic looking flowering plant, *Spigelia* is exceedingly easy to grow. Hardy to zone 5, the plants are native to moist woodlands, nearly serving as a groundcover in regions of Alabama. They are often seen growing on calcareous soils. Fortunately, the plant is highly adaptable to pH and will flourish in most well-drained soils in dappled shade. The key for success is to install the plant prior to July as – despite its ability to endure more northerly winters – it needs time to develop the proper root structure in order for the plant to survive winters wrath.

Spigelia has proven difficult for northern growers to get through the winter in cool greenhouses. Fortunately, availability has been improving over the past few years and there are now few, if any excuses why this exotic native should not grace your Garden!