

INDIAN-TOBACCO

Lobelia inflata

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton*

Although related to Cardinal Flower, the white to pale blue blossoms of Indian-tobacco are only 1/4 inch long and inconspicuous. The 5-lobed flower is divided, two small lobes on top and three larger lobes below. Blooming a few at a time, they are arranged along angular stems covered with bristly white hairs. When the flower withers, a globoid (inflated) seed pod develops. The lance-shaped leaves have somewhat wavy edges, are two inches long and alternate on the erect stem, 1-3 feet tall.

Indian-tobacco is native to eastern U.S. and Canada, and occurs in every county in Virginia. A summer annual which persists into late fall, the plant grows in meadows, cultivated fields, disturbed sites and woodlands in sun to partial sun. Blooms July-November.

This plant has a long history of use for asthma, bronchitis, pneumonia and cough. Native Americans smoked the leaves to treat asthma. In the 19th century, American physicians prescribed lobelia to induce vomiting to remove toxins



from the body, earning the name “puke weed.” Indian-tobacco contains a chemical related to nicotine, and until recently it was used in lozenges, patches and chewing gums to appease the need for cigarettes. However, the plant is considered toxic because of its strong emetic and sedative effects. ❖