

Colorado columbine

Scientific name: *Aquilegia coerulea* James

Common names: Colorado columbine, Colorado blue columbine

The distinct flowers of Colorado columbine are very noticeable as they bloom above the leafy vegetation. Each flower is a combination of intricately arranged sepals and petals. Sepals are the outermost layer of a flower which surround the petals in a bud. In many plants, sepals are green, but in the Colorado columbine, the five sepals are petaloid, meaning they bear color and look like petals. The Colorado columbine has five spreading sepals ranging in color from white to pale blue or blue to pink or purple. The five petals



are usually paler or white in color and are arranged in front and opposite of the sepals. The lower part of each petal is closed, forming a long spur with a bulbous glandular tip extending backward from the flower. The spurs often match the sepals in color.

Colorado columbines grow 15 to 100 cm tall. The leaves are divided into three leaflets, with each leaflet being 1 to 3-lobed at the tip. The underside of each leaf is often paler than the top surface. The basal leaves of this perennial herb arise from the ground on long petioles (leaf stems) but rarely surpass the flowering stem or the flower.

‘Columbine’ comes from Latin word ‘columba’ meaning ‘dove’. To some, the flower buds or the flowers from the rear look like groups of doves. The scientific name of Colorado columbine is *Aquilegia coerulea*. Some believe that Linnaeus derived the genus name *Aquilegia* from the Latin words ‘aqua’ meaning ‘water’, and ‘legere’ meaning ‘to collect’, in reference to the collection of water/nectar on the glandular tip of the spur. Others believe *Aquilegia* came from the root word ‘aquil’ meaning ‘eagle’, in reference to the resemblance of the spurs to eagle talons. The specific epithet ‘coerulea’ is Latin for ‘dark-blue’.

This short-lived perennial herb grows in mountain brush and aspen communities, coniferous forests, meadows, and on talus slopes. It prefers moist soils and open sunny areas or partial shade. Colorado columbine is the only native columbine species found in our area. It is native to the Intermountain West and is Colorado’s state flower.