

Exotic aliens from the West

BY GEOFF HOGAN

The wild lupins (sometimes spelled lupines) that flower in ditches and abandoned fields on Prince Edward Island are one of the most exotic wildflowers we have. From mid-June until mid-July we see their tall spikes along miles of Island roadways. But it is really during the last week of June and the first week of July that they are at their most spectacular. If they enthrall Islanders, think how they impress our visitors, for they thrive in such abundance in relatively few areas of the world.

There are many species of lupins growing wild in nature but none are native to the Maritime provinces. The lupin we have is the Washington Lupin (Lupinus polyphyllus) which is a native from British Columbia to California. The flowers grow on spikes from 2-5 feet tall and may be blue, white or pink. Bicolors are common. Even after the flowers have faded, the palmlike, segmented leaves are very attractive. In some places on the Island the color variants are even greater: rose-colored lupins, deep purple, yellow and many bicolor variations. These are a different strain than the "old-fashioned" blues and pinks. They are the product of many years of plant breeding by George Russell of Yorkshire, England and are true hybrids. The main parent, however, is Lupinus polyphyllus, the Washington Lupin. Naturally, these highly valued garden ornamentals are called "Russell Hybrids".

Exactly when lupins were introduced to P.E.I. is not clear, although Island botanist/naturalist Bruce MacLaren remembers seeing the first blue lupins along the roadside near Vernon River at least 50 years ago and maybe more. David Erskine, author of The Plants of Prince Edward Island, (1960, 1985) records them as being naturalized since 1912 at least.

The more intense pinks and colored forms did not appear until somewhat later, perhaps 25-30 years ago. Bruce's first recollection of these types was along Peters Road, south of Montague. Nowadays, lupins may be found across the Island although certain areas may predominate with one color type or another. The swaths of blue for miles around Vernon River may be unmatched anywhere on the Island, while the brilliance of the reds and pinks at Indian River are nothing short of spectacular. For the best combination of the three "wild types" (blue, soft pink and white) I know of none better than the roadsides near Basin Head. No doubt everyone knows of their own favorite lupin drive.

It comes as no surprise that lupins have become so widespread across the Island. They are prolific self-seeders and do especially well on poor, often disturbed soils, such as ditches and abandoned fields. Being members of the Pea family, lupins are capable of fixing their own nitrogen and thus are not inhibited by poor soil. Many people like to gather the ripe seeds in early August and scatter them along their own property, thereby aiding the natural spread of the species. Lupins cannot tolerate lime in the soil

