

## DWARF LARKSPUR: THE DOLPHIN AND THE LARK

Some of our spring wildflowers take on some pretty unusual shapes. Because of that, many people like to roam the woods to seek out some of these unusually shaped flowers. One spring wildflower that has an unusual shape is the Dwarf Larkspur (*Delphinium tricorne* [Michaux]).

The Dwarf Larkspur is a member of the Buttercup or Crowfoot Family (*Ranunculaceae*) and of the *Helleboroideae* Subfamily. The generic name, *Delphinium*, is from the Greek word, *delphis*, which is “dolphin”, because of the flower spur’s resemblance to dolphins. The specific epithet, *tricorne*, is Latin for “three horns”, because of the 3 spreading follicles on the seedpods.

The common name, Larkspur, was named for its spur, which resembles the spur on the back toe of Larks (*Alaudidae*). Other common names for this plant are Poison Weed, Spring Larkspur, Staggerweed, Three-horned Larkspur, and Wild Larkspur.

### Uses of the Dwarf Larkspur

Like most of the other members of the Family *Ranunculaceae*, the Dwarf Larkspur is toxic. It contains several diterpenoid alkaloids. Although the entire plant is toxic, these toxins are more prevalent in the seeds and in the young foliage. As the plant matures, these toxins become less concentrated in the foliage.

The Dwarf Larkspur’s toxins may be fatal to livestock, especially to cattle. Symptoms may appear within a few hours after consuming this plant. Symptoms may include digestive disturbances, burning of the mouth and the lips, nervousness, weakness, uneasiness, staggering, salivating, collapse, muscle spasms, depression, abnormal heartbeat, paralysis, weak pulse, numbness of the throat, respiratory problems, convulsions, and even death. The best prevention is to keep all livestock out of the woods.

Despite this plant’s toxicity, it was used externally for treating human parasites, such as lice and mites. There was even a pharmaceutical, Larkspur Lotion. However, it should not be used if the skin has cuts, scratched, sores, or other irritations because the toxins could be absorbed through them. Because of the dangers from the plant’s toxins, Larkspur Lotion is no longer available.

Persons with sensitive skin may get dermatitis from handling this plant. Therefore, this plant should never be handled without wearing protective gloves.

There was one known internal use of the Dwarf Larkspur. Some of the Native American tribes used this plant as a narcotic sleep aid.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE DWARF LARKSPUR

Perennial

**Height:** 4-36 inches. This plant may still grow even after flowering.

**Stem:** The stem is erect, hairy, single, smooth or hairy, succulent, and unbranched.

**Leaves:** The leaves are both basal and stem leaves. Both leaves are palmately compound. The stem leaves are alternate and are located near the base of the stem. The basal leaves

have long petioles. Both leaves are dark green, smooth or rough, about  $\frac{3}{4}$ -6 inches wide, palmately veined, and are palmately lobed with 3-7 irregular lobes and deeply cut clefts. **Flowers:** These flowers are arranged in an elongated, loose, terminal, racemous cluster. The flower is bilaterally symmetrical, stalked, about 1-1½ inch long, about  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch wide, and is blue, purple, or even white. Each flower has a calyx of 5 irregular bright sepals (the top sepal projects upward to form a slightly bent and upright  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch-long spur), a corona of 4 small, and separate petals (the upper 2 petals are white, spurred, and are encased in the calyx spur, and the lower 2 petals are blue, purple, or white, broad, and are fringe clawed), 3 pistils, and numerous stamens. Flowering season is usually April to June.

This flower is insect pollinated. Because the spur contains the nectar, only the Ruby-throated Hummingbird (*Archilochus colubris* L.) and a few species of insects with long tongues can reach it. This flower is even open at night for some night-pollinating insects. Some insect species with short tongues will chew into the spur to get to the nectar.

**Fruit:** The fruit is a dry seed capsule or pod with 3 spreading or diverging, horn-like seed follicles that curl outwards. Each follicle contains many seeds and splits open along 1 side.

**Seeds:** These seeds are 3-angled.

**Roots:** The roots are tuberous.

**Habitat:** This plant is found in moist or rocky woods, meadows, and on slopes or ledges. It prefers alkaline soils.

**Range:** Much of the eastern United States, except the Northeast and Florida. The Dwarf Larkspur is the most numerous of the Larkspurs.

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