

Growing Penstemons

Fact Sheet #7.428

Gardening | Flowers

Y. Henson, L. Langelo, 2/2021

Why Grow Penstemon?

There are many Penstemons that are native to Colorado (Nebraska). There are about 280 species of penstemon native to North America, 60+ native to CO and 24 natives to the Great Plains, including Nebraska which has about native 10 native species. However, there are other nonnative species and selections that grow in Colorado and Nebraska. There are many benefits for using penstemon in home and commercial landscapes including naturally adapted to their specific Colorado/Nebraska climate, soil, and environmental conditions. When correctly sited, they do well on reduced inputs such as watering, fertilizing, and pruning. Penstemons can be used in a variety of environments from low desert to alpine. Using Penstemon in the landscape can bring you a variety of color from May through July. A few blooms later at high elevations and others have a second bloom later in the season. These plants range from herbaceous to woody. Though most live for many years, some are short-lived while others are biennial. This variety widens their use in the landscape making them more versatile.

Other benefits of using Penstemon native to Colorado/Nebraska is the increase in attracting pollinators. With the rapid urbanization of Colorado/Nebraska adding these plants to our landscapes helps to maintain biodiversity that might be lost to development such as building developments and road construction.

There are many options for the use of penstemon in the landscape. Alpine, mixed shrub borders and rock gardens are also other uses. Many of the smaller varieties do well in troughs. When penstemon are utilized as bedding plants, they require warm well-drained soils with regular watering. They will bloom for a long period and perform best in soil with a long, mild summer and fall. Some examples of these are half-hardy hybrids like 'Twizzle' series, 'Delfts Blue Riding Hood', 'Red Riding Hood' and 'Prairie Twilight' mixes or seed strains. If penstemon is used in a traditional perennial border, interplant other perennials with similar cultural requirements to extend the season's color. Large-flowered European hybrids, eastern species, and their cultivars along with west coast penstemons are the best for zone 6 and above. Canadian and US hybrids, northern, mid-western and eastern species and their cultivars are used best in zones 5 and below. Many of the tender new hybrids and species like *Penstemon heterophyllus* are all good choices for containers. Repeat flowering is important for container-grown penstemon.

Here are a few of the newer cultivated penstemon selections to try growing in the landscape, listed as follows: Blanca Peak Rocky Mountain Beardtongue, *Penstemon strictus*; Compact Pineleaf Beardtongue, *Penstemon pinifolius* 'Compactum'; Electric Blue Foothills, *Penstemon heterophyllus* 'Electric Blue'.



Quick Facts

- Penstemons grow in rock gardens, slopes, raised beds, troughs, pots, containers, traditional perennial border.
- Penstemons attract hummingbirds, butterflies and bees.

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Selection

Penstemons are a low maintenance plant. However, some of the plants listed in the table can only be started from seed. Whether from seed or from a young plant, this does not mean they can grow successfully anywhere at any exposure. Choose a native or wild species that closely matches the type of soil, temperature range and precipitation of your landscape environment. You must understand what soil and exposure you have on your sites. Be sure to make use of the many micro-climates in your landscape to help find a place for a special penstemon.

Most penstemons require six hours of full sun to produce erect stems that produce flowers of clear and bright colors able to withstand wind and rain damage. As your elevation increases, the need for six hours of full sun decreases. However, there are some that prefer afternoon filtered light or shade. The higher the altitude or the hotter the climate, penstemon will bloom longer with some afternoon shade.

Planting

Penstemon requires good aeration and drainage. Good drainage and aeration are required for the crown of penstemon plants. Avoid planting in locations with standing water. Before planting, amend the soil with humus, fine gravel, and compost to add pore space to improve soil drainage and appropriate moisture retention and mix these ingredients in to a depth of 12 inches. The best amendment is a finished compost made from leaf mold. A finished compost changes soil structure well in all types of soil mixtures. Sites with a sand and gravel mix allow the homeowner to accommodate a wider selection of penstemon, especially allows for drainage. Most penstemon prefer a slightly alkaline pH above 7.0. However, this requirement varies with the species. Incorporating pumice or ground oyster shell will help amend the soil for better growing conditions. When planting penstemon in rock gardens, slopes and raised beds, you have the most ideal sites for many penstemon. Northern and alpine species are dependent on your soil preparation and the area's precipitation.

Watering Requirements/Water Use

Overall, penstemons are "drought tolerant". Soils that

are well-drained are ideal because they will allow for root penetration. It is extremely important to match the soil type with the desired species to meet the appropriate water requirement. This recommendation needs to be applied regardless of the environment it is planted in. This is a general rule that needs to be applied whether you are growing penstemon in a container, trough or as an annual. Remember the hybrids bred for garden containers will need regular watering which means infrequent slow-trickle watering.

Test the soil moisture weekly by inserting a long screwdriver in the soil to check how far the soil moisture has traveled. Adjust watering needs based on recent precipitation. The watering requirement for penstemon depends on species such as the large-flowered hybrid species that requires some moisture but not be allowed to dry out completely. Avoid over watering these plants to avoid crown rot and decreased plant vigor.

Fertilization

Generally, fertilization is not required. Older and longer blooming plants may benefit from fertilization. However, do not use fertilizers high in nitrogen. Fertilize after the first flush of blooms.

Continued Maintenance

To ensure the health of our penstemon, it is important to think about their care long after they are established. The large-flowered hybrids and bedding types need only dead-heading.

If more of these plants are desired, then leave the lower seed capsule to dry and reseed in the planting beds. Some penstemon species and hybrids will need to have their stems cut back after blooming. For many other species little pruning is needed. Winter protection is only necessary if the plants were not planted in the right place initially.

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Scientific Name Common Name	Growing Elevation	Bloom Time*	Exposure	Soil/ Moisture	Bloom Color	Form/ H x W	Comments
<i>Penstemon albidus</i> White penstemon	3,500-6,800'	Late May, early June	Sun	Adaptable, dry	White to purplish	Erect stems, 10- 16" tall	Native to the prairies of E CO and NE
<i>Penstemon ambiguus</i> Bush penstemon	2,500-6,500'	May through Summer-second flush with summer rains	Sun	Lean, sandy, dry	White to light pink, fragrant	3" bushy mounds, widely spreading with age	Open sandy sites in parklands and shrub lands of E CO
<i>Penstemon angustifolius</i> Narrowleaf penstemon	4000-7,500'	April - June	Sun	Well-drained, sandy or gravelly, dry	Sky blue, pink or lavender	1 to several erect stems to 1' tall	Semi-desert, woodlands and openings of NE and CO <i>P. angustifolius</i> var. <i>caudatus</i> is the most adaptable and long-lived in the garden
<i>Penstemon barbatus</i> Scarlet bugler	4,000-10,000'	July-August with a repeat flush in September	Sun to part shade	Any well-drained, adaptable	Scarlet 'Elfin Pink' is a popular cultivar with coral-colored flowers.	1 to a dozen stems, 4' x 2'. Evergreen leaves turn purple in winter	Semi-desert, foothills, woodlands and openings (SC CO)
<i>Penstemon breviculis</i> Short-stem beardtongue	4,900-6,800'	May and June	Sun	Sand or Clay	Blue to purple	1' tall erect stems in multiples	Sagebrush/ pinon- juniper of SW CO
<i>Penstemon caespitosus</i> Mat penstemon	6,000-10,000'	May and June (August)	Sun to shade	Sand or Clay	Blue to blue-violet	Creeping mat or low mound, 5- 8" x 1'	Open sites in parks, canyon lands, shrub lands, forests of W CO
<i>Penstemon cobraea</i> Large-flowered beardtongue, Dew flower	To 5,000'	(April)May-August	Sun	Any well-drained, medium to dry	White, pink, purple Largest-flowered penstemon species.	1-2' x 1-1.5'	Plains, open hillsides of SE CO Common parent in many hybrids.

<i>Penstemon comarrhenus</i> Dusty beard tongue	4,000-10,000'	May-August	Sun (falls over in shade)	Well-drained, sandy to clay	Pink-blue	18" – 3(4)' x 6-12"	Open woodlands, canyon sides in four corners states and Nevada
<i>Penstemon cyanocaulis</i> Blue-stemmed penstemon	4,000-9,000'	May and July	Sun	Course sand, gravelly, dry	Lavender-blue	1 to a few stems, 1-2' tall	Pinon-juniper forest openings of W CO
<i>Penstemon digitalis</i> Foxglove penstemon		May-August	Sun to light shade	Adaptable, medium moisture	White, pink, lavender	3-4 (5)' x 1.5'	Not native to W US but naturalized in NE <i>P. digitalis</i> 'Husker Red' is the standard with burgundy foliage. 'Dark Towers' holds purple foliage color longer. "Dakota Burgundy" is shorter than the previous two.
<i>Penstemon eatonii</i> Firecracker penstemon	2,000-7,500'	April-July	Sun	Well-drained, dry, lean	Scarlet	Few to several upright stems, 1-3' x 1'	Semi-desert, foothills in W CO 2 varieties: <i>P. eatonii</i> var <i>eatonii</i> and <i>P. eatonii</i> var. <i>undosus</i>
<i>Penstemon eriantherus</i> Fussy-tongue penstemon	4,600-8,000'	May-July	Sun?	Most, well-drained, dry	Lavender to pink	Spreading stems, 6-14" x 12-24"	NE Colorado and NE
<i>Penstemon fremontii</i> Fremont's penstemon	5,000-8,000'	May-July	Sun	Sandy to clay loams, dry	Medium to dark purple-blue	1 to a few upright stems, 6-18" tall	Dry hillsides in shrub lands, pinon juniper forests, NW CO
<i>Penstemon glaber</i> Mountain beardtongue	6,000-10,000'	(May) June - August	Sun to light shade	Adaptable, well-drained	Medium to dark, rich blue	6-18(24)" x 2-3'	Foothills to montane, gravelly soils in C CO Two varieties found in CO: <i>P.</i>

							<i>glaber</i> var. <i>brandegeei</i> and <i>P. glaber</i> var. <i>alpinus</i>
<i>Penstemon gracilis</i> Slender penstemon	4,600-6,900'	June-August	Sun	Sandy to gravelly, dry	Lavender to pale blue	A few stems, 10-20" tall	Foothills, meadows in Central CO
<i>Penstemon grandiflorus</i> Shell-leaved penstemon	3,500-4,200'	May-July	Sun	Gravelly soil Short lived and susceptible to leaf-spot disease when over-watered	White, pink, lavender or blue	Erect, stout stems, 2-4' tall	Planins of NE CO and NE <i>P. grandiflorus</i> 'Prairie Jewel' is a Plant Select™ selection
<i>Penstemon hallii</i> Hall's penstemon	10,000-14,000' Adapts to gardens at lower elevations	July- August	Sun	Gravelly, sandy	Shades of blue to pink	Crowded stems to 8" tall	Alpine plant found only in the central mountains of CO
<i>Penstemon heterophyllus</i> Foothills penstemon	Below 5,500'	summer	sun	Average, medium to dry.	Shades of blue	Evergreen clumps 1.5' x 1.5'	Native to foothills, grasslands, chaparral & open forests of CA. Best in containers and annual bedding except in warmest areas of CO. Many hybrids. 'Electric Blue' has large intense blue flowers.
<i>Penstemon lentus</i> Thick penstemon	5,500-7,800'	May, June	Sun	Sandy, dry	Shades of blues and reds. There is also white-blue variety	2' stout, erect stems	Semi-desert, foothills, woodlands and openings in Four Corners Region
<i>Penstemon linarioides</i> Bluemat penstemon	4,000-10,000'	May-August	Sun to part shade	Well-drained to heavy soils. Very drought tolerant.	Lavender-blue	Mat of upright or sprawling stems, 1' x 3'	Sagebrush, pinon-juniper, ponderosa in Four Corners Region

							<i>P. linarioides</i> subsp. <i>coloradoensis</i> 'Silverton' is a Plant Select™ selection.
<i>Penstemon mensarum</i> Grand Mesa penstemon	7,000-10,200'	May- July	Sun to part shade	Adaptable, medium to dry	Deep blue-purple	Several stems to 3' tall	Meadows and forests, W CO A Plant Select™ selection
<i>Penstemon x mexicali</i> Mexicali penstemon Hybrids	At least 7,000'	June – September	sun	Moist to dry	Pinks to purples	12-18" x 12-14"	Hybrids of Mexican and American species There are 5 Plant Select™ selections
<i>Penstemon palmeri</i> Palmer's penstemon	2000-9,000'	June – Aug.	sun	Course, well-drained, lean, dry	Pale pink, fragrant	To 6' x 14"	Native to Utah desert shrub to mountain brush, PJ-ponderosa. Introduced to CO in roadside seed mixes.
<i>Penstemon pinifolius</i> Pine-leaved penstemon		June and July	Sun with some afternoon shade	Adaptable, medium to dry	Red, orange, yellow	10-12" x 12-18"	Native to S NM and E AZ ponderosa forests. There are many different selections
<i>Penstemon rostriflorus</i> Bridge's penstemon	4,000-9,000' (11,000')	June-September	Sun to dappled shade	Well-drained, rocky, gravelly, dry	Red-orange	Shrubby, evergreen mounds with many upright to sprawling stems, 2' x 2'	Open to semi-shaded sites in foothills in SW CO A Plant Select™ selection
<i>Penstemon rydbergii</i> Rydberg's penstemon	4,500-11,500'	July and August	Sun	Loamy, organic, moist. Tolerates dry.	Blue-purple	Mat with slender stems to 2.5' tall	Mountain meadows and along streams in W CO
<i>Penstemon secundiflorus</i> Sidebells penstemon	4,800-10,500'	May and July	Sun	Well-drained, gravelly, sandy	Pink to lavender - blue	Several erect stems to 20" tall	Plains and foothills, montane C CO

