

Wild about Penstemons



Springtime in the desert is magical, especially in landscapes and gardens where penstemons are exploding in a riot of color. In the spring and early summer these perennial wildflowers produce tall flower spikes ranging in color from pink to red to purple. Their vivid shades provide a striking contrast to yellow-flowering plants such as Brittle bush (*Encelia farinosa*), Angelita daisy (*Hymenoxys acaulis*), and Palo Verde trees. Native to the southwestern U.S. and northern Mexico, these hardy plants thrive in our arid climate with minimal supplemental irrigation, fertilizer, or maintenance. As an added bonus, the bright tubular flowers are irresistible to hummingbirds! You probably won't notice penstemons until they bloom.

Most penstemons form a dense rosette of long, narrow leaves, which hug the ground and blend into the landscape. But in the spring and summer, something miraculous happens; glorious flower spikes emerge from these little mounds of foliage. Penstemons, like their close snapdragon relatives, produce many spikes of narrow flowers, which bloom from the bottom of the spike to the tip. There are many different species of penstemons suitable for planting here in the southwest, with a wide range of sizes, flower colors, and bloom periods. Mixing several species together in a landscape can produce a kaleidoscope of color and prolong the flower display.

Place penstemons in full sun, or under the light shade of desert trees such as mesquites, palo verdes, and acacias. Penstemons are susceptible to root rot, so plant them in well-drained soils and be careful not to over-water. Some supplemental water in the spring and summer is beneficial, but avoid irrigating penstemons in the winter months. Lanky, floppy flower spikes are a sign of too much shade, or over-watering. After blooming, let the flower stalks dry until the seed is ripe. To tell if the seed is mature, crush a brown seed head between your fingers. If tiny black seed fall out, your spikes are ready to harvest. Sprinkle the seed around your yard, or your neighbor's! Next winter your penstemon population will multiply, as new seedlings germinate.

Marcus Bollinger, a gifted landscape architect, once explained that penstemons are meant to "migrate" around a landscape. Don't be concerned if your older plants decline, because seedlings will pop up nearby to keep the population going! Penstemon spikes can also be used as cut flowers. For the best results, water the soil around the base of the plants the night before cutting the spikes. Harvest the spikes in the early morning and place in a vase of water immediately. The spikes of *Penstemon eatoni* and *Penstemon parryi* both have good longevity, but try other species as well!

PENSTEMONS TO ADD TO YOUR COLLECTION

Penstemon ambiguus...Unlike most penstemons, Sand penstemon is shrub-like, forming a semi-woody mound to three feet tall and wide. From May through September it is covered with masses of pale pink to white flowers. Its narrow, bright green leaves tend to drop off in the winter. In very cold

locations, plants might actually freeze back to the ground, and recover in the spring. This penstemon is especially suited for middle deserts, as it is native to elevations from 4,500 to 6,000 feet. In Albuquerque, for instance, it thrives and blooms throughout the summer months. However, it tends to rot out in the summers in the low deserts. Sand penstemon insists on good drainage, and will not tolerate over-watering.

Penstemon amphorellae is a low, sprawling penstemon that blooms in May with 15 to 18-inch-tall spikes of large, light blue flowers. It has narrow, light green leaves. This fast-growing native of Coahuilla, Mexico is hardy to about 15° F, grows in full sun to part shade, and requires moderate irrigation to look its best. It can reseed in the landscape. This penstemon is not too happy in our hot Phoenix summers, but performs well in Tucson, where the night temperatures are cooler.

Penstemon baccharifolius...Rock penstemon is shrub-like, forming a small clump of deep green foliage to 2 feet tall and wide. It looks good year 'round. In the spring and summer, short spikes of rose-red flowers are produced on the branch tips. Rock penstemon requires especially good drainage to perform well in the landscape. Del Rio is a named clone that was selected near the Texas/Mexico border for its intense flower color.

Penstemon eatoni...Firecracker penstemon features rich red flowers on 2-foot-tall spikes, from late February to April. The hummingbirds really love this one! Firecracker penstemon grows along sandy washes and slopes across the southwestern U.S., from 2000 to 7000 foot elevations.

Penstemon palmeri...Scented penstemon is native to higher elevations, from 4000-6000 feet, and is a great choice for those of you in colder areas. It has spectacular 4 to 6-foot-tall spikes of huge, light pink, fragrant flowers.

Penstemon parryi...Parry's penstemon is probably the most well-known and popular native penstemon. Its 3-foot-tall stalks of hot pink flowers provide a glorious display of color from late February to early April. Parry's penstemon is found from southern Arizona to northern Mexico, at elevations of 1500 to 5000 feet.

Penstemon pseudospectabilis...Canyon penstemon produces 3-foot-tall spikes of rose-purple flowers in the spring months. As its name suggests, Canyon penstemon grows wild in canyons and washes across the southwestern U.S., at elevations of 2000-6000 feet.

Penstemon strictus...The Rocky Mountain penstemon is best suited for higher elevations, as it rarely blooms in the low deserts. It is native to the upland grasslands of Colorado and Wyoming. In cooler parts of Arizona, it blooms in the early summer with 2-foot-tall spikes of violet-blue flowers.

Penstemon superbus...Coral penstemon, or Superb penstemon, is a stunner! Its spikes of vivid coral flowers can shoot as tall as six feet in the spring. Try combining this species with some of the smaller selections for a layered effect. Coral penstemon occurs at elevations of 3500-5500 feet, in rocky canyons and washes of Arizona, New Mexico, and northern Mexico.

Penstemon triflorus...Hill Country penstemon is native to west Texas, and is a recent introduction to the Arizona scene. For the past three years, Hill Country penstemon has been one of the first species to bloom (in early February), and continues to send up flower spikes through April. It has especially large, deep rose flowers marked with colored streaks, called "guidelines", which lead

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hummingbirds and other pollinators to nectar stored deep inside the blossoms. With its compact form and 2-foot-tall flowers spikes, Hill Country penstemon makes a great foreground plant for some of the taller selections.

Penstemon wrightii... Sometimes known as Texas Rose, this penstemon closely resembles Coral penstemon. However, its form is more compact, with spikes topping out at 4 feet in height. Its intense orange-pink flowers really stand out in the landscape. Although it is relatively "new" to Arizona's nursery trade, this Texas and Arizona native was a favorite in Europe before World War II!

For everything you'll ever need to know about penstemons, here's a great resource book: *The Gardener's Guide to Growing Penstemons*, by David Way and Peter James, Timber Press, 1998. Happy Planting!

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