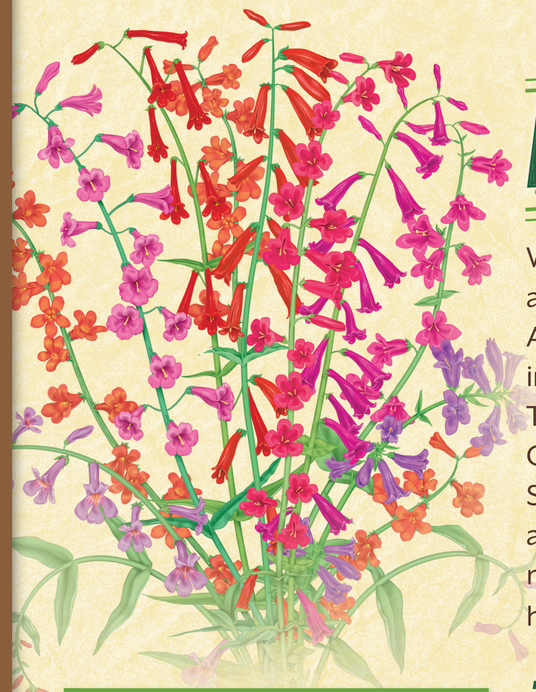

PENSTEMANIA!

Without a doubt, the genus Penstemon is a favorite of gardeners, its approximately 275 species widely cultivated on both sides of the Atlantic since it was first described by Virginia botanist John Mitchell in 1748.

These long-blooming perennials are endemic to North America from Canada to Guatemala, with every state in the continental United States having at least one native species. Their graceful floral spikes and color variety (shades of red, pink, blue, purple and white) have made them favorites across the pond as well, with hundreds of hybrids developed by Europeans since the early 19th century.

THE "UNFUSSY" SPECIES

Perfect for drought-tolerant and wildlife-friendly landscaping, penstemons are low-maintenance. Most prefer sunny and dry conditions; though some do well with less sun and more water, all need well-drained, un-amended soil. Around Tucson, provide occasional water during dry summer months, but almost none when it is cool in fall and winter. Reaching heights of 1' to 3' tall (.3m to .9m), plants readily reseed themselves, so give them room to grow.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Penstemon's more common name is "beardtongue," so-called because most species have what looks like a "fuzzy" tongue protruding from each flower. These are actually infertile stamens incapable of producing pollen.

RED HEADED BEAUTY

Tohono Chul's patented penstemon hybrid began as a natural cross amongst several species being grown in the Propagation Greenhouse, further refined by staff's careful selection of the best and most hardy plants. Its vivid, slightly scented, purplish-red flowers bloom mid-March to end of May.

POLLINATION PARTNERS

In the Sonoran Desert, native penstemons are a favorite of hummingbirds and have evolved to appeal to their sensibilities. Their flared, tubular flowers provide abundant nectar, are made to fit a hummingbird's long beak and tongue, and coincidentally, come in a range of hummingbird-approved colors — just so long as it is red! The feeding birds in turn, pollinate the flowers. Besides hummers, though, bees, wasps and even moths also visit penstemons, each having their favorite color.

PENSTEMON SPOTLIGHT

WHERE TO PUT YOUR PENSTEMONS!

sunny conditions · shady conditions · dry conditions · wet conditions · usually available in the Tohono Chul greenhouse

Penstemon parryi **aka Parry's Beardtongue or Desert Penstemon**

- local favorite
- Sonoran Desert native
- blooms March and April
- bright pink

Penstemon palmeri **aka Palmer's Penstemon**

- one of the few scented Penstemons
- northern Arizona native
- blooms March to September
- pinkish-white

Penstemon amphorellae **aka Mexican Blue Penstemon**

- northern and central Mexico native
- blooms July to September
- light blue

Penstemon triflorus **aka Heller's Beardtongue or Hill Country Penstemon**

- Texas Hill Country native
- blooms fall to winter at Tohono Chul
- rose red

Penstemon smallii **aka Small's or Violet Beardtongue**

- eastern United States native
- blooms fall to winter at Tohono Chul
- pale to reddish-purple