

# Cobaea Penstemon

By Ricky Linex

Wildlife Biologist, Natural Resources Conservation Service

If you are looking for an easy to recognize wildflower, you are in luck with this month's range plant. *Cobaea penstemon* is in full bloom now and will be through June. I often reference a quote from a wise conservation technician with the Natural Resources Conservation Service who works in the Rolling Plains of Texas. His advice upon seeing a plant you can't identify is, "Come back in a month and it will likely have a flower on it and then you can identify it." His advice makes a great deal of common sense since a plant with flower or seed head is much easier to identify. Trust me, this advice has worked more than once for me.

This penstemon is a very showy and attractive native perennial forb featuring single or multi-stems with erect growth. The stems will be one to two feet in height with flowering in the upper part of the plant. Stems and leaves are covered with dense fine hairs. Leaves are glossy deep green, opposite one another up the stem with the leaves directly attached to the stem in the upper part of the plant, described in botanical terms as sessile in attachment, while the first leaves at ground level project out away from the upright stem and attached with a skinny leaf stem, described as stalked. The shape of the leaves are lanceolate, meaning they are wider at the base and narrow to a skinny tip, much like the tip of a lance or the blade of a sword. The leaves are cupped in cross section like the brim of a western hat, growing sharply upward. Notice also that the leaves alternate ninety degrees from one pair of leaves to the next pair. The leaves have a heavy white mid-rib and show an irregular saw-toothed margin. When looking at early spring rosettes of *Cobaea penstemon* remember that Engelmann's daisy also grows from a rosette with a white mid-rib, but it lacks the opposite leaf growth and the glossy green leaves. With just a bit of experience, when you see the shiny dark green leaves, opposite in growth, you will know it is a penstemon you are seeing.

The flowers are large and showy, bell-shaped, two-lipped and clustered at intervals in upper leaf axils. Looking at the front of an individual you will see what appears to be two leaf petals on top and three on the bottom, giving the meaning to it being two-lipped. Flower color ranges from white to pale lavender, streaked with purple strips inside the flower. These purple strips are said to be directional lines to guide pollinators to land and sample the nectar while at the same time transferring pollen from one flower to another. Fruit is an upright, four-valve capsule that opens from the tip, slowly releasing seeds when the plant is disturbed or brushed against.

*Cobaea penstemon* as well as the two dozen or so other species of penstemon, is a nutritious forb with the new growth readily eaten; it is often seen with the stem tips of new growth removed. Value is excellent for livestock, deer and antelope. Crude protein value has been measured at 14 percent on early growth in April with moderate energy values. Seeds are eaten by quail, dove and songbirds. The scientific name of this plant is an exact reversal of the common name, *Penstemon Cobaea*.

Penstemons most often grow on limestone prairies, rocky outcrops, gravelly slopes and sandy open woods. While there are species of penstemons that can be found across all vegetational regions of Texas, this species can be found from the Rolling Plains east to the Blackland Prairie and south to the Rio Grande and to the Gulf. Proper grazing use and rotational grazing will allow this desirable, nutritious forb to thrive. Seed of *Cobaea penstemon* is commercially available if you wish to add it back to your land. Penstemons attract several species of moths and are large enough for native bumblebees to visit and even catch a nap within the large flower. All penstemons are beautiful wildflowers and worthy additions to native landscapes. Due to being grazed out in many pastures, look between the road and the fence on rocky outcrops and you will see this prized wildflower. I hope you see some on your next trip out in the pastures.

Photo captions:

1 These rosettes of *Cobaea penstemon* feature the glossy green leaves and white mid-rib in mid-April growth.



2 Opposite leaves show the upward curling resembling a hat brim and teeth on the margin of the leaf.





3 Petals two on top and three below show the two-lipped flower shape of penstemons.



4 Early May growth of a single stemmed Cobaea penstemon is a joy to see.





5 Clusters of *Cobaea penstemon* flowers attract moths and bees to pollinate the flowers.



6 Multi-stem growth is commonly seen on older plants or where plant was initially browsed or damaged.





7 Upright growth of seed capsules holds seeds well past maturity to ensure dispersal of seeds are spread out over time.

