



Penstemons

Penstemons are a natural choice for informal, water conserving landscapes. Some commercial growers have been propagating these perennials collected from wild populations in the western United States and northern Mexico. Like snapdragons, penstemons belong to the Figwort family (Scrophulariaceae). The flowers attract hummingbirds and range in color from orange to red, to purple, to white, and everything between. Their growth form ranges from low-growing ground covers with short flower spikes to small basal rosettes that produce tall flower spikes.

Penstemons have tubular flowers with tri-lobed petals jutting outward from the lower part of the corolla, hence the common name: beard tongue. Penstemons are spring bloomers and look best in rock gardens or planted among desert shrubs or cactus. They prefer well-drained, sandy soils, full sun, and are very drought tolerant once established. Some irrigation may be required during extended drought periods, especially to keep young seedlings alive. Soil preparation with organic amendment can improve establishment. Do not apply fertilizers. Following establishment, seeds will germinate and your Penstemons will naturalize if left undisturbed. Seedlings grow slowly for the first year and established plants can live for three or more years. Below is a short list of Penstemons suitable or native to north central Arizona.

Arizona Penstemon or Desert Beardtongue (*P. pseudospectabilis*) has shocking pink flowers borne in profusion on this robust, bushy, 3 to 4 ft. tall plant. The blue-green, triangular leaves are fused together around the stem. Blooms in spring and again more lightly in summer.

Firecracker Penstemon (*P. eatonii*) is a low growing, shrubby, evergreen perennial that blooms in late winter and early spring. It forms a small, dark green mound to 1 foot tall by 2 feet wide, with fiery scarlet-red flower spikes adding another 2 feet in height. It has dark green, lance-shaped leaves that are 1 inch wide and up to 5 inches long.

Hill Country Penstemon (*P. triflorus*) is a bushy, upright perennial to 2 feet tall, with glossy green leaves. The large, 1.5 inch long, deep pink flowers are funnel-shaped with 5 lobes. These lobes are strongly marked with dark lines, which are believed to attract pollinators to the nectar at the base of the tube. The flowers occur in clusters of 3 along the flower spike.

Scented Beardtongue or **Palmer Penstemon** (*P. palmeri*) is fragrant and bears a profuse display of large white blooms tinged with pink or lilac. This huge plant has many flower stalks reaching 5 to 6 ft. It can bloom the first season from seed.

Parry's Penstemon (*P. parryi*) is a spring-flowering perennial with light to dark pink or sometimes white flowers. The plant consists of a low rosette of leaves, usually less than 10 inches high with flower stalks that can reach 4 feet tall. In time, the plant can reach a width of about 2 feet. The dark gray-green leaves are up to 4 inches long. Parry's Penstemon is native to the lower deserts of Arizona.

Beardlip or **Red Penstemon** (*Penstemon barbatus*) has brilliant scarlet flowers borne in profusion on 2 to 4 ft. stalks. Hummingbirds love it. Needs well-drained soil.



Firecracker Penstemon (*P. eatonii*) Max Licher @<http://swbiodiversity.org>. Usage Rights: Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike (CC BY-SA)

When growing Penstemons from seed, be sure to cold stratify the seeds prior to sowing or sow them in fall to provide the winter chilling that will break seed dormancy. A simple stratification method is to put seeds between layers of moist paper towel inside a partially sealed zip lock bag and place the bag in the refrigerator for one to two months. Make sure the paper towel stays moist but not wet and then sow the seeds gently in pots or prepared soil. Search for them in wildlands where they can be found at almost any elevation across northern Arizona. Happy hunting!



Arizona Penstemon or Desert Beardtongue (*P. pseudospectabilis*). Sue Smith, Native and Naturalized Plant Database.



Scented Beardtongue or Palmer's Penstemon (*P. palmeri*). Sue Smith, Native and Naturalized Plant Database.

Additional Resources

University of Arizona, Yavapai County Native and Naturalized Plant Database
<https://cals.arizona.edu/yavapaiplants/>

American Penstemon Society
<https://penstemons.org/>

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