

Penstemon – a colorful Washington native plant for your garden

Penstemons comprise the largest plant genus endemic to North America. Of the nearly 280 species found in North America, nearly 50 are native to our state. Penstemons, are a member of the Figwort family, which also includes monkey flowers and snapdragons. The name Penstemon comes from the Latin word, Penta (5) and stemon (stamen) because the flower has 5 stamens, 4 fertile and 1 sterile. The tongue-like “bearded” sterile stamen gives this plant its nickname, Beard-tongue.

Some Penstemons are shrubby and others are herbaceous perennials. Two natives worth considering are *P. fruticosus* and *P. serrulatus* or Cascade Penstemon. *P. fruticosus* is an evergreen shrub whose sometimes short longevity in the garden is mitigated by its easy propagation via cuttings. In his book, Gardening with Native Plants, Art Kruckeberg deem this plant “four star in quality – compact stature, good foliage, superb flower, exceptional hardiness, and easy propagation.” Native Americans used a tea from *P. fruticosus* for headaches and stomach aches. Roots of *P. fruticosus* were placed on teeth to cure toothaches. *P. fruticosus* blooms May through August

P. serrulatus or Cascade Penstemon (also called Coast Penstemon) is an herbaceous perennial that blooms from June to early August. Unlike its Eastern Washington brethren, this Penstemon will not be deterred by our mild, damp winters. This plant with its 8”-28” stems features deep blue to purple flowers.

Penstemons are a favorite of rock gardeners. Native to consider are *P. davidsonii*, *P. rupicola* (*Rock Penstemon*), and *P. cardwellii* (large patches of which appeared near Mt. St. Helens after the 1980 eruption when volcanic rubble covered previously forested land.) You may have to experiment to see what will grow best for you and what non-native Penstemons complement your natives. Many hybrids are available from Nurseries and your bees may even create a few stunning varieties on their own.

To begin exploring the wide world of Penstemons, I recommend that you visit the American Penstemon Society’s website at <http://www.apsdev.org>. Their organization conducts an annual seed exchange and their website provides information on:

- How to identify the different species,
- How to propagate them for the garden,
- How to grow the different species successfully,
- Where to find them in the wild.

Also check out our nursery to see what varieties are currently available there.



Cascade Penstemon, *P. serrulatus*



P. fruticosus